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MARGARET
TORRINGTON
OR THE
VOYAGE OF LIFE

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MARGARET TORRINGTON;

OR,

THE VOYAGE OF LIFE.

BY

EMMA JANE WORBOISE.

Author of "Violet Vaughan," "Thornycroft Hall," "St. Beetha's," "Hymns and Songs," &c.

"So he bringeth them unto their desired haven."—*Psalm* cvii. 30.

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MARGARET TORRINGTON.

CHAPTER I.

GILBERT AND I.

It was a beautiful June evening, and I had no mind to shut myself up in the house, while the waves were dancing on the shore, and the sky was blue—oh! as blue as the ribbon on my Sunday bonnet; and the bold scarred cliffs, that stretched themselves far out to the headlands of the bay, were bathed in all the glory of a broad, descending sun. Tea was over, and I took down my bonnet from the peg; not the one, of course, trimmed with cerulean satin ribbon; but a great, misshapen thing of green and white check gingham, of very homely manufacture, turned to a sort of neutral tint by constant exposure to the salt spray, and breezes, and wet weather. Also I put on my holland tippet and sleeves, the latter too short at the wrists, but concealing my angular red elbows. My dress was an old lilac print; one of the old-fashioned sort really and truly "warranted to wash," and to wear besides. I had worn it in reversion from my mother, who had bought it as part of her marriage outfit,—people did not talk about their *trousseau* in those unenlightened days;—and now it was considerably faded, and, though every tuck was let out, was nearly up to my knees: but then I wore frilled trousers which came down to my ancles, as was the correct thing at that time for young ladies under fourteen years of age.

Well, I took that unlucky bonnet of mine—a "drawn bonnet" I think my mother said it was—down from the peg that belonged to it—Miss Margaret's peg, as our old servant,

Susan, always called it, and I stuck it on my head and pushed my thick curls under it, and, skipping-rope in hand, hurried down to the beach. Not that I intended to skip; "tom-boy" as I am afraid I was, I knew that I was too old to be seen skipping beyond the precincts of our own garden; —but I liked to have something in my hand, something to swing about, and toss about, while I talked to myself—rehearsing imaginary conversations, or composing poetry by the yard, which had neither rhyme nor measure,—wonderful blank verse, that would have astonished myself had I ever taken the trouble to write it down in black and white, which I always meant to do, and never did.

We did not live exactly at St. Eldred's, a small, quaint town, sloping down from shelving heights to the very water's edge, and commonly known as St. Eldred's-by-the-Sea. My home for ten years had been at North Combe, a village one mile distant from the town; for my father, a physician of considerable eminence in the large inland town of Deddington, where I was born, had given up his connexion there on account of failing health, and had bought what was considered a very snug and lucrative practice at St. Eldred's-by-the-Sea, where he hoped by less fatiguing work, pure air, and marine breezes, to build up afresh the tottering edifice of an already shaken and undermined constitution. Therefore, in order to enjoy to the full all the advantages accruing from salubrity of climate, he refused to pitch his tent in or near the town itself, which certainly had, as he said, a very fishy smell at certain seasons of the year. He might have chosen the genteel suburb of the town commonly known as "The Hill," far removed from unsavoury odours, and the vicinage of screaming fishwives; but then he had come to St. Eldred's expressly to live upon the shore, and though the Hill looked down upon the waves, you had a tolerable journey before you reached them.

Kelver House, at North Combe, was to let, most opportunely as my father thought; for it was large and roomy, respectable-looking enough for a modest M.D., and not at all high-rented. "It was the most windiest, ramblingest,

scramblingest, unconvenient house in all the world," was the verdict passed upon it by our faithful Susan during the first week of her residence therein, and she never altered her opinion.

I knew well enough that it was both "rambling and scrambling," for it rejoiced in more little flights of stairs than I ever counted; it had funny little passages that seemed to lead nowhere in particular, and three-cornered rooms, and plenty of dark closets, and a whole suite of garrets, given over to mice, and lumber, and general desolation. But all this was what I liked; and as for the wind, I gloried in it, and relished nothing better than standing on our lawn, when the breeze dashed the salt spray in my face, and nearly blew my bushy ringlets off my head. As for Kelver House being inconvenient, I never believed it and I never shall; it was to me as a fairy palace,—as the "House Beautiful," and nothing less! and I loved its grey, weather-beaten stones, its dilapidated chimneys, its small-paned windows, and its heavy, beam-crossed, low-ceiled rooms. Dear old Kelver House—the blessed home of my thrice happy childhood! I swung the gate behind me as I rushed upon the narrow strip of turf and thrift that separated our garden from the shingle of the beach, and, looking back, I saw my mother sitting at an upper window, busy with her needlework. Oh, my darling mother! how I left you to bear all the burden of our little household by yourself, in those selfish, careless days of my unthinking girlhood!

My mother called me back, I can see her face now,—her beautiful matronly face, so sweet, so pure, so tender, bending over the mignonette that we were coaxing into bloom upon the sill; it seems but yesterday since I stood there, my hand clasping impatiently the gate, my dancing feet all eager for the smooth, cool sand, or a scramble over the fretted rocks a little lower down, and yet my heart beating with a childish and exulting pride in that fair face, that I knew was the fairest, and held so to be, in all the country round. But why chronicle thy loveliness of face and form, my sainted mother?—for long ago the dust was strown upon that pure

Madonna brow. Rather let me tell of all thy gentleness and goodness, thy devoted wifehood, and thy faultless motherhood, of all the Christian graces that adorned thy quiet life, of thy faith, and patience and humility; for their memory was still fresh about St. Eldred's when people had well-nigh forgotten how very fair was the casket that enshrined the jewel! For it was not yesterday, but thirty years ago, and more, that I stood, half-vexed to be detained, half-pleased to hear that musical low voice, calling, "Margaret, Margaret!"

"Yes, mamma."

"Where are you going, dear?"

"Only down the shore, as far as the black rocks. The tide is coming in, and I want to see Gilbert: he will be in his boat on the little creek."

"Do not be late, darling: papa likes to see you at supper-time; and, Margaret, your bonnet is all awry, and your tippet-strings are on your shoulder."

I gave myself a couple of jerks that were supposed to remedy the deficiencies in my toilet, and then, throwing a kiss at mamma, who, nodding pleasantly, resumed her work, I dashed down the shingly steep, and was soon threading my way among the salt-water pools which intersected there the sandy reaches. Now I leaped from one patch of sea-thrift to another; now I crossed a little purling freshet; now I stooped to gather the tender branches of the succulent *salicornia*, or glass-wort, which tasted so excellently, just like celery or cucumber, I was not certain which,—but my mother often pickled it instead of samphire;—till at last I came upon the narrow cove through which ran the little creek that afterwards developed itself into a salt marsh; and there, upon the shallow waters, yet unaffected by the rising tide, I saw the boat I was looking for, and near it a figure, which I knew to be that of my friend and staunch ally, Gilbert Tredgold!

Gilbert was a year older than myself; his father was a fisherman, and, as all the neighbours said, of a very good old Cornish family, "but come down in the world."

Much further down, in point of worldly circumstances, they could not come; for Stephen Tredgold and his wife, though as decent as hands and thrift could make them, were known to be miserably poor, for the fishing was not what it used to be,—the "takes" were smaller and smaller, and the markets far from sure. Nevertheless, Gilbert followed his father's calling, and a bold lad he was, and as proud of his little boat, which he gloried in keeping all "taut and trim," as any captain who walks the deck of a gallant man-of-war. Stephen was getting rheumatic, and, though not old, was certainly wearing out; and it was to Gilbert—cheery, dutiful Gilbert—that all the family looked as to their main stay and anchor; and he, nothing loth, accepted the charge, and looked forward proudly to "doing for the old folk at home when father's rheumatism should confine him to the main-deck of their own kitchen."

Gilbert was mending his nets now, and a fine odour of wet tar and fish saluted my olfactory nerves as I came along the bank to where he was sitting. The sea-birds were screaming so wildly, and a patched sail hung up to dry was flapping so vigorously against a rock, that Gilbert did not hear my step as usual, and only turned round to greet me as I reached his side. Then he sprang up, and, hat in hand, bowed like a finished gentleman;—staunch friends as we were, and wild hoyden as I was, he never forgot that he was the poor fisherman's son, and I the daughter of Dr. Torrington, of Kelver House.

When we had exchanged greetings, Gilbert returned to the broken meshes of his net. Beside him, on the bank, thickly covered over with sea milk-wort and matted *arenaria*, lay a Latin grammar,—*my* property, which, in the capacity of tutor, I had lent or given to the fisher-boy. My father had begun to teach me Latin almost as soon as I could read the Bible in my mother tongue, and so, at fourteen, I could read Virgil as easily as Watts's hymns. As for French, I knew very little about it, though mamma and I, about once a fortnight, waded painfully through a course of "Hamel," both of us taking it as a duty we might not but fain would

shun, for in mamma's young days every gentlewoman was *not* expected to speak French with the accent and intuition of a born *Parisienne.* And yet it was incumbent on the sons and daughters of a gentleman to learn French—after a fashion, that is.

Italian you were supposed to study in the last year of your pupilage, and then forget all about it, save as the pages of your music-book brought before you certain words that were decidedly *not* English. As for *German,* no one ever thought of such a thing, at least in mamma's young days, and so mamma was not to blame for knowing nothing of it, and, of course, she could not teach me what she did not know herself.

And Gilbert, whose yearning after every kind of knowledge was irrepressible and ardent, had seized upon my impulsive offer to teach him all the Latin I knew myself, though of what use it could be to him in steering and drawing for divers sorts of finny creatures I neither knew nor cared. It was enough for me that he wanted something I had it in my power to give him. I could *not* give him new nets, which he needed, poor fellow, sorely, sorely, but I could give him Latin, and dearly I appreciated the *luxury of giving.*

"Isn't it a lovely evening, Gilbert?"

"The loveliest we've had this year, Miss Margaret; it will be such a sunset presently! Only look this minute at the Rudrhoe cliffs on t'other side the Bay!"

Sure enough, the Rudrhoe cliffs were glowing like ruddy bronze, in the level beams of the fast sinking sun, and the white cottages of the far-off Rudrhoe village gleamed like silver in the hollow of the great scarred rocks; the sands were golden brown, and the spotless wings of the gulls and sea-mews flitted like pure snowflakes against the deep and stainless azure of the sky. It was an evening to fill with rapture the passion-fraught, beauty-loving soul of poet or of painter!

"Gilbert, what is the use of mending those old nets? Don't you see they fall to pieces as fast as ever you repair them?"

"Yes, Miss Margaret; but don't you see they are all the nets I've got, or am likely to get, and I must make the best of what I have!"

"But the fish must often get away."

"They do, they do, Miss Margaret; but that's no fault of mine; I mend them to the best of my ability; and then, if the *pisces* wag their fins, and get into deep water again, I can't help it; it's the good Lord's will."

"You do not suppose God troubles *Himself* about mackerel, and whiting, and all the rest of the tribe?"

"Well, Miss Margaret, I should say He does. Isn't it written that not a sparrow falls to the ground but what the *Father* knows of it? Well, then, surely He knows about the creatures of the watery world as well! I wish it was His will that the nets would hold together, and that the slippery things would stay to be caught, and creeled, and sold."

"But if it is not His will, what is the use of your mending and tarring your nets, and going out in such dreadful weather to risk your life?"

"It's just this way, Miss Margaret. God has given me brains and hands, and I must use them as well as I can, and ask Him to bless the using. If I were lying on a bed of sickness, I would try to trust Him to send me food, without making any effort of my own; but, while I am young, and strong, and jolly well, I think He means that I should *work* with all my strength and all my sense, and I must leave it to Him to send prosperity. Why, I do believe our Saviour Himself would never have worked the miracle of the loaves and fishes if it hadn't been really needed. The people were in a desert place, where there was no meal for bread, and no lake or river where they could cast for fish: so the Lord fed them at once: He spoke, and it was done. But, if the means of procuring food had been at hand, I do think He would have made the five thousand, and the women and children exert themselves! God does not love that we should eat the bread of idleness. No, no; we must rig ourselves all taut and trim, and spread or reef our

sails, according as is best, and we must steer knowledgeably and trust to Providence for prosperous gales. If I put out to sea, with tattered canvas, and helm out of order, and a leak or two in the vessel, I must expect disasters, and it is idle to cry to God to steer me safely back again to port; but if I do all that in me lies, and a storm arises, and my sails are torn to ribbons, and my bows broken in, and my rudder will not answer, then I may call upon the Lord, and *look* for Him to succour me in my hour of need; for it is written of them that see the works of the LORD, and His wonders in the deep,—'Then they cry unto the Lord in their trouble, and He bringeth them out of their distresses. He maketh the storm a calm, so that the waves thereof are still. Then are they glad because they be quiet; *so He bringeth them unto their desired haven.*'"

"Why do you say those last words so emphatically, Gilbert?"

"Because it sounds so good. I am only a sailor in a small way,—I never go very far from land; but I know what it is to be tossed up and down, and like to go to pieces, and then get into port—into the desired haven! And they do say, life is a voyage, and we are all bound for some haven or other. Do you think it is so, Miss Margaret?"

"I do not know; I never thought about it, Gilbert. If life *is* a voyage, I have always taken it, so far, in a snug little cock-boat moored on to a fine large bark, and I have never been in deep waters yet."

"No, Miss Margaret, you haven't. You've just been rocking about in creeks and shallow pools, and you don't know what a strong breeze or a heavy sea is like."

"I should like a little breeze, Gilbert; it's rather tame living here at North Combe always!"

"Oh, Miss Margaret, don't'e quarrel with your calm, quiet life; may be there'll come a time when you'll look back on these pleasant, free-and-easy days, just like a shipwrecked man looks back upon his leisure on the shore."

"What makes you say that, Gilbert?"

"Nothing in particular, miss; only there are hard lines for everybody; and just now—dear me, you are not at sea at all, but on a little inland lake, taking your pleasure in a fairy coracle, with silken sails and golden paddles."

"But, Gilbert, I should like to get out to sea. The lake is all very well for children, but I am growing out of childhood I shall soon be a woman. I should like to see the world. I should like—"

"What would you like, Miss Margaret?"

"I should like to feel myself to be *living;* to go to many places; to know many people. I should like to be rich, that papa might give up his practice, and we could all travel for his health, and you should go with us, Gilbert. If I were rich, you should not spend your time in mending rotten nets, and caulking leaky boats, and going out with the night-tide; —you should have your wish, and learn all that is to be learnt!"

"Thank you, Miss Margaret, just the same as if you put the money down, and said, 'Here, Gilbert, go to school, and afterwards to college!' But I'll try hard to get some learning. I should like to be worthy of the Tredgold name, for we were not fishermen and peasants always;—there's Tredgold-Austell, they tell me, down in Cornwall, a fine estate that once belonged to my forefathers,—a grand old place, I've heard, but very desolate. I *should* like to see it!"

"So should I, Gilbert; but I suppose it is out of the question; I have never been ten miles from St. Eldred's since I first came here, a little child, not four years old. Suppose you should ever get back this Tredgold-Austell?"

"Tredgold-Austell is the name of the little town; Tredgold Court is what the house is called. Well, Miss Margaret, *I mean to get it back*, God helping me!"

"You do! Gilbert, you are crazy; you would want what Susan calls 'a power of money,' and you haven't any, now."

"No, Miss Margaret, but I have got two strong hands and two good legs to carry me about; and I've got some brains, with not much in them at present; but,

look you, I mean to learn every mortal thing I can, and to be a good fisherman, too. I take it that it's a bad way to get on, to begin by neglecting your duty in that state of life to which it has pleased God to call you; there's nothing gained by doing anything that's right to do by halves; and I'll mend these old nets as long as ever they will hang together; and I'll take the fish to market with a will; but I can take up the broken meshes and get my lesson too; and many's the page I've made my own between our cottage and St. Eldred's. Miss Margaret, you once lent me a map of the world; have you another of Europe that you could spare me for a bit."

"You shall have an atlas, if you like; at least I will ask papa about it, and he'll be sure to lend it you; he likes you, Gilbert, and so does mamma!"

"The doctor and madam are both very good to me, and so are you, Miss Margaret; and that reminds me, I've seen some of the purple sea-weed you want a mile or two on the other side of Black Tor; and there are handsome shells, too, —such as you would like for your collection;—and next week the tide will serve, and I will take you there in the boat, if you please, and Alice, my sister, will like to go very much."

"That will be charming! I will ask mamma if I may go. Tell Alice she must not bring her knitting, but make up her mind for a real holiday."

"And now you must go home, Miss Margaret,—it is twenty minutes to nine."

"How can you tell?"

"By the lights on Torstone Hill, also by the tide,—don't you see the "Little Gipsy" is afloat, and the creek is filling as fast as it can fill? And look, the bar is covered, and there is surf as far as Stanger's Bank! It is later than I thought, —only a quarter *to!*"

So I bade my friend good-night, and scampered home; not so fast as I came though, for I had to keep nearly all the way upon the shingle, and everybody knows what sort of travelling that is. When I reached Kelver House, papa

and mamma were at the gate looking for me, and the summer moon was beginning to cast long rays of silver on the placid sea. Oh, happy days of innocent trust, and peace, and pure unfeigned love! Happy child that I was, in the safe anchorage of those blessed home affections! Why did I long to set sail upon the troublous sea of life?

CHAPTER II.

GLIMPSES OF THE FUTURE.

THE next morning mamma and I sat with patience and resignation over a page of "Telemaque." Thirty years ago "Telemaque" was read or stumbled over by everybody who learned French, and the first two or three chapters are certainly interesting enough; and it is very nice to read about Calypso, and Eucharis, and the rest of her nymphs, and very amusing to perceive how these fabled deities are as frail as the frailest of mortals, giving way to shocking tempers, burning with envy, wrath, and cruel jealousy, and occasionally taking such vengeance as only the sons and daughters of Olympus are privileged to take. But, then, there are pages upon pages of the driest and most ascetic morality, volumes of counsel from that trying Mentor, and confused philosophy, which I am pretty certain Frenchmen themselves never entirely understand; and mamma and I were helplessly floundering through a string of sentences all pronouns and participles, and it seemed to our unenlightened comprehensions that the great goddess Minerva, the wonderful Pallas Athene, under the form of Mentor, was really pouring out unmitigated "twaddle."

The page was accomplished at last *somehow;* there was rather more nonsense than sense in our rendering of it,—that was all; and poor mamma was even happier than myself when the old calf-bound, dimly-printed book was closed, and we could turn with easy consciences to the comparatively recreative task of irregular verbs and numeral adjectives.

Ah ! my dear young ladies, studying in the school-rooms of the seventh decade of this clever nineteenth century, you little know how hard we of the prior generation had to work, in order to get ourselves presentably educated and well "finished." There were no "Ahn's Courses" then, no "*Mary's Grammar*," no *systems* teaching people all they wished to know in half-a-dozen lessons; we had to toil, and grope, and wonder, for our teachers, whose advantages were scantier than our own, were often in a labyrinth of doubts themselves, and knew not how to answer many of the questions propounded by their pupils. It is all changed now, and woe to the presumptuous wight who establishes himself in the tutorial chair without first qualifying. Teachers now are expected to know everything perfectly; they are to teach without books; they are to make lessons, however abstruse, positively charming; they must supply ability where that slight requisite is wanting; in short, they are to educate extensively and thoroughly, without pains or weariness on the part of the happy pupil without reproof, and, of course, without the smallest hint of punishment; to carry the young student from the first step to the last of his or her curriculum, in a comfortable first-class carriage, by express, and sometimes, special train. Our parents trod the grand highway of learning painfully on foot, getting a lift now and then as chance might favour them; we who are the middle-aged men and women of the day, travelled the same road respectably in a solemn, slow stage-coach; our children take it jauntily by rail, and I should not be surprised if a fourth and fifth generation flew from point to point of science and accomplishment in air balloons or by electric telegraph.

I had finished my French lesson with an emphatic "No more of that till another week," when papa, who was not out that morning, came in, and, to my intense horror, proposed to examine me in the very studies I had just joyfully discarded. Even mamma looked rather melancholy, for "Telemaque," as usual, had made her head ache.

"My dear," she said, "Margaret is tired, and, indeed,

I am too; take another morning, when she only has her Latin."

"*Only* her Latin! What a womanly impertinence! Why, my dear Maggie" (Maggie was mamma, not I; I always had the full benefit of my name in order to avoid confusion), "Latin is the study of a man's life,—a perfect Latin scholar is rare indeed; while your jingling French can be picked up by any silly school miss who opens her ears wide enough, and has a tolerable memory."

"I don't pick it up, papa. I strain and plod after it, and only just grasp little stray bits here and there; it seems to me a very stupid language, nothing to compare with English."

"You are not in a condition to compare the rival tongues, Margaret. Never make comparisons unless you are sure of your premises on both sides. Fairness and impartiality are frequently wanting in a woman's character. Cultivate them carefully; be above the weaknesses of your sex."

"I will try, papa; but I think it is far easier to be impartial, to be rational, and even logical, than to learn French. I wish I might leave off studying it."

"Wherefore, my daughter?"

"I do not like it."

"I do not like getting up in the middle of the night, or going over the downs to Culverwell, with rain and sleet blowing in my face; *but*—it is my duty if I am called to do it."

"But, papa, am I called to learn French?"

"I think you are."

"On what grounds?" This was not childish impertinence. I knew well that papa would wish me to ask this question. He was no stickler for a blind obedience when reasons could be given; though, had it been a matter upon which it was expedient that I should not dilate,—a matter beyond my years and small experiences,—he would have expected and received a prompt, unquestioning submission. I had confidence in my parents. I knew they were wise, and kind, and just,—it is not what every child knows, alas!—and I was sure they would never require from me anything which was

not consonant with deep affection, uncapricious judgment, and my own best interests. Oh, if every child had such grounds of confidence as I had in parental rule and wisdom, it would be a happier world, there would be fewer failures, fewer mistakes, and many a goodly ship launched on this world's great ocean would sail proudly into port, instead of falling upon shoals and quicksands. The greatest gift of God is eternal life through His Son; after that are the blessings of a perfect marriage, and of parents really good, and wise, and tender.

Papa answered me—"On several grounds, Margaret, your mother and I wish you to learn French, and we should not wish it merely for a whim, or for our own satisfaction; we know it will be a pleasure to you some day to have acquired ever so small a knowledge of the language. Beyond that, it may be to you a source of real good; it *may*—mind, I do not say it will, but it may stand you in better stead than your favourite Latin."

"Is it possible, papa?—the one so poor a language, so irregularly constructed, and the other so fine, so grand a piece of science?"

"My dear, it does not become an English-woman to talk disparagingly of irregularities of construction. I love my English tongue; it is grand, resonant, copious; and in sublimity of sound, in depth of meaning—not neatness of expression, mind—it yields to none in my estimation. But the construction of the language is most irregular, and I cannot laugh at foreigners when they declare we are utterly irregular and systemless. But that was not what we were discussing; it was the expediency of your making yourself mistress of as much French as you can gain on English shores."

"And you said, papa, that one day I might find French of more account than Latin; it was that which puzzled me."

"Suppose you were cast upon a desert island, which would you value the more—a basket full of provisions or a roll of a hundred bank-notes!"

"Of course, if I could not get off the island into some place where they bought and sold, *the food!* I might die with ten thousand pounds in my lap, and not a bit of bread to put into my mouth; and I could keep the money till some ship took me off, when it would be very useful."

"Precisely, and in like manner you may some day find your limited French of more account than all the Latin I can teach or you can learn."

"I cannot see, papa, how it could be so."

"When you understand me, Margaret, I am afraid you will not approve; but, listen, my daughter,—I wish to speak seriously. Suppose—mind! I only say *suppose*—I were to go to a far country and leave you here with scarcely any provision, what would you do?"

"Indeed, papa, I cannot tell; but you never would go away from England, or even from St. Eldred's, and leave mamma and me in such a position! You went last autumn to London, you know, but you took care to leave us plenty of housekeeping money, and if that had run short there was the bank, for mamma had several blank cheques that she could fill up if she wanted them."

"It was not of a mere journey of a few days, or weeks, or even months, that I was speaking, my dear."

"*Papa!* And oh, mamma! why do you look so pale? What is it?"

Mamma laid down her work, and for a minute struggled to regain her wonted calmness; then she said, in a low, broken tone, "Margaret, your father speaks of journeying to a country whence there is no return,—the country that one reaches only by crossing the river of death."

I looked up in extreme surprise and consternation. *Papa die!* Well! yes, he might certainly; for all men were liable to death, and I had not lived to be fourteen without meeting with widows and orphans, and knowing that there were such things even in our little seaside world as desolated homes. But, generally speaking, people were old when they died,—or so I thought,—and papa was quite in middle life, and, though far from strong, free, as I imagined,

from any fatal malady. But the idea of death, even in the distance, fell upon me like an icy shower. I could only gaze at my parents, as they sat before me, turning from one to the other, and wishing all the while I could wake, and find I had been dreaming.

Papa was the first who spoke. "Margaret, my child, do not look so scared, so hopeless. I did not speak of speedy departure, though not the strongest and youngest among us may boast himself of to-morrow. I only spoke of what might be some day. I am not immortal,—the doctor cannot always cure himself any more than his patients; when God calls us we must go. Margaret, you distress me; you are old enough, and, I hoped, wise enough to think of the path that lies before you;—you know difficulties must be faced."

"Yes, papa; and it was only last night, foolish child that I was, that I thought I should like some difficulties to overcome,—something to struggle with,—some trial, out of which I should come grandly, and all be right at last. But that one thing I *could not* face?"

"What one thing, my daughter?"

"Death! Losing you or mamma! Oh, papa! why did you talk of it? It will be ever in my mind now: and we are so happy, we three, in this dear home of ours; and everybody loves and honours you. Surely God would never let so great an evil happen."

"God, my child, sees not as we see. He knows what is best, and He will do that which is best. But we must trust Him: we must not question His providences."

"It could not be for the best."

"Hush! hush, dear!"

"I cannot help it, papa. Why did you torture me?—filling me with so terrible a dread and fear: and mamma, too,—she has gone out of the room; she cannot bear it."

"The thought is not new to your mother, Margaret; we have talked of it—of the change that may be—many times. But I am glad she has left us, that I may speak to you more freely, Margaret. Though you are very young, and

are, in some respects, a thorough child, yet I think you can, if need be, prove yourself a woman. Now, summon all your courage and strength, and listen quietly to what I have to say."

"I will try, papa."

"You know that I have not been quite well for many years; my health failed me when you were quite a babe. I gave up my heavy practice, which would soon have cost me my life, and came here to content myself with a smaller sphere, and a reduced income, that I might, if it were God's will, drink in fresh health and vigour from this pure, salubrious air, and so prolong my days. And God blessed the means I used; I lived by rule, I did not work too hard, and I grew better and stronger every month; but always there was something which told me I could not do as other men did—as I would have done had I been of sounder constitution."

"You seemed to me quite well, papa."

"I did. I seemed so often to myself; but my own professional experience taught me that there was mischief secretly at work. Still, so long as I was prudent, I believed that no danger would ensue. So it went on till this time last year, when I began to be apprehensive that the disease so long kept dormant was about to be aroused into activity. I went up to town in the autumn, and consulted several of my brethren, men of the highest capability and celebrity. They one and all confirmed my own conclusions: the malady so long suppressed had asserted itself very vigorously—it had gained much ground; the evil day might be deferred, but it must come at last."

"Oh, papa, what is it? You have no fever, and I have heard you say there is not a grain of consumption in your system."

"There is not, I verily believe. It is my heart that is affected, Margaret; it has been physically wrong these twenty years, and now it is worse than it has ever been."

"That is why you lose your breath going up to the Hill?"

"Yes. Now, my dear, mark me: I *may* live many

years. I should like to,—if it were God's will, I should like to see you settled in life, and your mother well provided for; but if it may not be,—and something whispers to me that it will not be,—I should like to do all I can to ensure your comfort—your happiness."

"Papa,"—and I spoke very passionately,—"nothing could give me comfort, if you had left me for ever; and I should never know happiness any more."

"You think so now, Margaret; and I doubt not you would always cherish my memory most tenderly, most sacredly!—but life is before you, dear child, and I know, though you may not believe it, that, with me or without me, you will have to bear your part in the great conflict that awaits us all if we pass the Rubicon of youth. You will have joys and sorrows, cares and pleasures, temptations and victories; you cannot be in the world without taking your full share of its trials and struggles. Each one must live his life, his own peculiar life, irrespective of the past; and, though one may be most faithful to one's beloved dead, one cannot always stand pensively in the shadows. Gradually, through the goodness of God, the great anguish passes. Time heals the deepest wounds, though the scars, and a certain shrinking when a careless finger touches them, may remain for ever,—that is, for ever in this world; there will be no sad memories, no painful thrillings in the better life beyond the grave. And so, Margaret, I want you to be strong, patient, enduring—if not for your own sake, for your mother's."

"Yes, papa." I spoke quite quietly, but the room seemed filled with mist; my own voice sounded strangely in my ears, and the pleasant sunshine on the lawn looked cold, and fading, and wan, and spectral, like that which falls from watery clouds when the day is sadly waning.

"Understand, my child, it may not be required of you for many years, it may never be; mamma may go home before me yet, we cannot tell; but if it should please God to take me first, I look to you to be your mother's help and comfort. I cannot leave you much money; I have had no

opportunity of saving since I came to North Combe; and to think of insuring a life like mine was out of the question. Therefore, Margaret, you may have to exert yourself. Do you understand me, dear?

"Quite, papa. If—if you were not with us, there would not be enough money for us both, for mamma and me. And I must do something."

"Just so, my dear child, and that makes me so anxious about your studies. I wish you to attend specially to those which may be useful to you; and that is the reason why I told you that French might be of more consequence to you than Latin."

"I see, papa. Few people would care to have their little girls taught Latin, while they would all require French; and I suppose I should have to teach, there would be nothing else for me to do."

"Unfortunately not, I suppose, unless——"

"Unless what, papa?"

"Nothing, my dear, that is, nothing worth mentioning. Now you know why I wish you to be diligent; I am thinking, too, you ought to go to school."

"Oh, papa, please not to send me from you."

"I shall not send you from me, my darling. I could not bear that any more than you; I was thinking that you might attend Miss Everett's classes in St. Eldred's.

"I think—yes, I think I should like that."

And then some one came to say that papa was wanted. And I sat still, looking listlessly at the sparkling sands without; but feeling that I could never be a careless, merry child again, never the light-hearted, thoughtless girl who had chatted so gaily with Gilbert Tredgold by the creek the night before. Surely my rash longings were to be fulfilled, surely even now I was setting sail for the mysterious Voyage of Life.

CHAPTER III.

OUR PIC-NIC.

FOR several days after talking with papa, I felt very miserable, and unable to enjoy the beautiful summer weather, which I had been anxiously expecting ever since the end of February. I stayed very much at home, or strolled about a retired part of the beach not far from our house, and I began to study earnestly, not knowing how soon all my small acquirements might be turned into business capital. But at the end of a week, my natural elasticity of temperament began to assert itself: things went on just as usual; papa took his regular rounds, visited his patients, and seemed in his ordinary state of health and spirits, while mamma occupied herself with her home duties in her own sweet, serene, and calmly-cheerful way.

I began to think that there could not be much danger, that I had disquieted myself needlessly, that I might keep my precious father for many, many years—perhaps till I was an elderly woman myself—and that he, and I, and dear mamma might live on at Kelver House till they sank into the grave from mere weight of years, and I could look back on the experiences of a tolerably long lifetime. I had heard of people living to be nearly a hundred, especially in our healthful air; and if papa and mamma would only stay with me till they were past ninety years of age, why, I should be an old woman myself, and beginning to think about my latter end. The more I thought about it, the more I flattered myself it might indeed be so; and again my feet went dancing on the sands, and my voice was heard chanting strange wild melodies in the sunshiny morning and rosy eventides. But every night, ere I lay down on my bed, I prayed passionately, "O God! preserve the life of my dear father—of both my parents. Do not let them die for many, many years to come."

But I did not say, "if it be *Thy* will!" How could I? I

was not a Christian child; and none can say "*Thy will be done*" who have not surrendered themselves heart and soul to Him in whose safe keeping are the issues of life and death.

When I say I was not a Christian child, I do not mean that I was morally worse than hundreds of girls of my age. I spoke the truth, and I should have scorned the remotest approach to aught that was false or mean. I was too proud to be anything but sincere, and I was besides naturally frank and fearless, and inclined to say what I believed to be right, without regard to consequences. Also, I had been brought up in an atmosphere of love. I never knew what it was to be uncertain of my parents' favour; I never had to puzzle myself about the way in which they would regard any of my movements.

If I wilfully did wrong, I knew they would be displeased; or, worse still, they would be sorrowful; but if I did my best, or only erred through ignorance, girlish impulse, or inexperience, I did not dread their censure. Never did I encounter the passionate blow, the bitter reprimand, the cruel taunt. I knew not fickleness of mood, caprice, or hasty anger; I was certain of *justice*—unfailing, discriminating justice. I was not chid to-day, and for the same fault unreproved to-morrow; what this week provoked just reprimand, would not go uncensured some weeks hence. Certain rules were laid down, certain laws were fixed, implicit obedience was exacted; and if my father had said to me, "Margaret, do not go near the great sycamore in the garden," I should have been quite sure that for valid reasons he had issued the command, and I should have unhesitatingly obeyed, even to avoiding the very shadow of the forbidden tree, though he declined giving me any explanation of so singular a prohibition. I had perfect faith in my father and my mother.

I have written more about this than I intended; but it is a point on which I feel very strongly. I look back upon the beautiful holy memories of my own childhood, and then I recall scenes I have witnessed in other families, failures I

have heard regretted, bitter disappointments with which I have sincerely sympathized; sorrows, estrangement, wrongs, distresses, and life-long miseries, all proceeding from injudicious early training; and again and again I thank my heavenly Father for the inestimable blessings of parents such as mine!

But I had not seen Gilbert Tredgold since the evening when we had talked together beside the creek, and I had almost forgotten his proposal to take me out in the "Little Gipsy" to the Black Tor rocks, till one particular morning, when, having finished my lessons, I was occupying myself with a re-arrangement of the shells and sea-weed I had been for nearly six years collecting, and which my father had assisted me to classify. And then I thought of the purple *alga* I wanted for my basket, and wondered when the tide would serve for the expedition, for well I knew that Gilbert would not forget his voluntary promise.

While I was thinking about it I heard some one on the gravel-walk, and, looking up, there was my friend just taking the side path, evidently intending to go round to the back entrance; his fishing creel was on his shoulder, and he carried in his hand a bunch of wild flowers. I sprang to the hall-door and called to him, but he answered, "I will just take the fish round to Susan, Miss Margaret, and then I am at your service."

In three minutes he returned, and, cap in hand, stood, inviting me to accompany him that evening to the Black Tor. He was not going out with the nets, the tides were just right for the little voyage, and his boat was in excellent order, and Alice and Bertha sent their duty and hoped I would go, for they were going too.

"I must ask mamma, you know, Gilbert," I replied, my heart bounding at the idea of the sail, and the great cove where I hoped to find all kinds of treasures. What papa had said to me that morning had so entirely occupied my mind, that I had quite forgotten to speak to mamma about the proposed expedition; and though I felt quite she would at once consent, it never occurred to me

to settle anything without expressed and definite permission."

"Of course, Miss Margaret, you must ask your mamma, and the doctor too."

"No, Gilbert; it will be quite enough if mamma says Yes. What she does he does, you know,—it is all the same; of course they think alike."

"Why, 'of course,' Miss Margaret?"

"Oh! do you not know? Husbands and wives, especially when they are fathers and mothers, always do."

I made this unqualified assertion as coolly and emphatically as if it were an undoubted fact. A few months later, and I knew a little better. Gilbert knew better now. He smiled and said, "Not always, Miss Margaret."

"Good husbands and wives think and feel alike," I returned, shaking my head oracularly.

"Perhaps so, Miss Margaret; perhaps not. It is a question I have never gone into,—perhaps I may some day; but it cannot matter to me now. I concern myself most with those things which must be attended to; but I'll think of what you say."

"Well, you will be married some day, I dare say, Gilbert. As for me, I shall never marry,—I shall stay at home always with papa and mamma,—if—if, oh, Gilbert!——" and I fairly broke down, and fell to sobbing.

"What is it, Miss Margaret?" he asked, greatly concerned.

"Papa thinks he may not live many more years; but, Gilbert, he must be wrong,—he looks the same as ever, and his appetite is very good. He says there is something wrong with his heart; but, if there is, it may go on for ever so long, as it has gone on till now; may it not?"

"Surely it may, Miss Margaret. I would just tell God all about it, and leave it."

"*Tell* God about it, Gilbert? You mean pray that it may not be?"

"I think I mean more than that; I mean just what I say; I don't think it can be wrong, but it seems to me such

a comfort, in all one's troubles and perplexities, to go to God, and tell Him every bit that is in one's heart; that is what is meant by '*pouring out one's heart*,' I should fancy."

"Do you ever do so, Gilbert?"

"Yes, Miss Margaret. When I don't know how to steer, when the way is not plain before me, when I feel full of perplexity, I just tell the Lord every bit about it."

"But He knows it, does He not?"

"Surely He does; but then He is always ready to listen to our little troubles, just as the doctor always would be ready to hear what you had to say, Miss Margaret,—ay, and readier; for the doctor *might*,—I don't suppose he would, seeing he is the best man I know, but still he is only a man, and he might lose patience; but our Father, God, never loses patience with His children."

"Well, I must run now, Gilbert, and ask mamma about this evening; I suppose I may say the weather is all safe?"

"Yes, Miss Margaret; that is, if a thunderstorm does not come on. There is thunder in the air, but I do not think it will trouble us to-day. However, if the afternoon turns out suspicious, we can put the pleasure off."

"To be sure we can; but I should be wofully disappointed now I have made up my mind to go; if I want to do a thing, Gilbert, I cannot bear to be baulked."

Gilbert laughed, as he replied, "It's not pleasant to be baulked, Miss Margaret, even in little things; but as for not bearing it, one *must* bear in this life, for there's a deal to be borne, and the only way is to trust in God, and put your shoulder to the wheel. But I'm keeping you, Miss Margaret"

Away I ran like the wind to find mamma, and when she quite understood what we proposed, and that the weather seemed quite favourable, and that Alice and Bertha were to be of the party, she gave her consent, only stipulating for a certain hour of return. It may seem strange to some people that my parents thus permitted me to associate with the children of a fisherman like Stephen Tredgold; but, as you must have perceived, the Tredgolds were no common

people. I could learn from them no evil, but only good; and in all their bearing and conversation there was a native purity and refinement that seemed at times strangely at variance with their mode of life and with the humble home which was their only shelter. And my father and mother believed in the nobility of goodness; and they were better satisfied, as I afterwards learned, that their one precious child should find companionship suited to her years with these simple-hearted, unartificial, but intelligent sons and daughters of poverty, than with the elegantly dressed genteel young ladies and gentlemen of St. Eldred's, who were for the most part brought up on principles to which my father was diametrically opposed.

When I came down again into the hall I missed Gilbert; but I heard papa's voice, and knew that they were talking together in the study. Thither I went, and found them busy together over some almost invisible object, which papa had just been mounting for his microscope; and when they had talked about sundry wonders of "circulation," which were to me so many incomprehensible mysteries, and the doctor had selected some books for his young friend, Gilbert went away.

The afternoon was glorious, only very warm; but a light breeze came across the almost glassy waters, as, basket in hand, I took my way to the creek from which we were to set sail. Ah, how well I remember that sultry summer day! I pause a moment, and, laying down my pen, see once more, as clearly as if they were still before my eyes, the shining sea, the wide, smooth sands, the little rippling creek, winding away to meet the great channel that lay behind the jutting promontory of the Black Tor Head; the white town of St. Eldred's, with its magnificent harbour, its two church towers, and its terrace and villa-crowned hill, far behind me. I see my own loved home, nestling, as it were, under the sloping heights of Kelver, the long lines of shingly beach, the beautiful cliffs, the swelling downs beyond the dim outline of the winding coast, and here and there a sail idly drooping on the placid sea. Ah! "many a year is in its grave"

since, in my childish glee, I saw the sultry haze gathering like a veil upon the lovely drowsy landscape, on that peaceful summer day.

I was just getting tired of walking in the heat, and tired of my burden, when I reached the creek; and there lay the "Little Gipsy," waiting for her passengers, and Gilbert unfurling her flag, as I appeared round the rock which formed the small headland of the tiny bay where the "Little Gipsy" usually lay at anchor. Alice was sitting near at hand, busy with her knitting. She was about nineteen, a pale, delicate girl, with a slight curvature of the spine, which prevented her from taking part in any kind of active service. She could not even help her mother very effectively in their simple household duties; if she exerted herself one day, she was sure to pay the penalty for many days to come; but if she sat quietly in the rocking-chair which Gilbert had manufactured for her, only strolling gently upon the beach, or sewing or knitting quietly, she suffered little inconvenience, and gave little trouble or uneasiness to her friends. She had never been able to apply herself sufficiently to learn successfully the art of dressmaking; but she could sew neatly, and her knitting was something marvellous, it was so perfect, and so very fine, almost rivalling the wonderful productions of the Shetlanders. She could knit, she declared, without thinking about the pattern, and without looking at her needles; and truly I have seen, or rather heard, her clicking away, and weaving her filmy thread into all sorts of intricacies, when there has not been sufficient light to discern each other's features.

The aristocracy of St. Eldred's—the Hill people—gave her many orders, not exactly for anti-macassars, for I am not sure that there were any such things known at the period of which I am speaking, but for counterpanes, window-curtains, pincushions, and doyleys, and even for scarves and pelerines, which certainly rivalled the most delicate productions of the loom. So, in one way and another, Alice earned sufficient money not only to render herself independent, but to contribute, more or less, to the

support of the whole family. She was a fragile-looking creature, and appeared much younger than she really was; her face looked dull bent over her work, but when raised in conversation that interested her, was fitfully lighted up with a strange spiritual loveliness, that seemed scarcely of the things of time.

Bertha was only eleven, a stout, healthy girl, spirited, and full of fun. She had rich black, satiny hair, and dark Oriental-looking eyes, and, though terribly sunburnt, and "gawky," as Susan called *me*, because I outgrew my frocks and held myself ungracefully, and jumped downstairs three steps at a time, she gave promise of more than ordinary beauty of face and form. I was greeted enthusiastically by all three, and handed as deferentially as if I had been a princess into the boat, where the softest cushion and Mrs. Tredgold's Sunday shawl were spread for my accommodation. But at this distinction I demurred; I like spring mattresses and velvet sofas now, well enough, for I am an elderly lady to whom such luxuries are an inexpressible comfort; but in those bright days of perfect vigour and untamed health, I preferred an uncompromising wooden seat to any other. Oh! the difference between fourteen and forty; and all the years that come afterwards, if God prolongs one's life! And true it is that

> "If youth could know what age would crave,
> Many a penny youth would save."

Also I felt that Alice needed the soft seat, and I insisted on her taking it; and, after some little altercation, she consented, and, the tide serving, we spread our well-patched sail and pushed off, Bertha establishing herself at the helm, which she knew well enough how to manage; and, with great dexterity, piloting us among the shoals and sandbanks, till, the tide rising higher with every wave that broke against our bows, we found ourselves in the deep sea-water, and the coast gradually fading into the haziness which nearly shrouded, but could not hide, the beauty of the scene.

It was nearly five when we landed in the little cove where

we were to find the coveted shells and sea-weed ; and there we lighted our fire, and from my basket I produced the tea and sugar, and sweet-cake mamma had stowed therein, and we made a most satisfactory repast, which was all the more enjoyable because it was taken under difficulties and in unusual circumstances. And then we set to work collecting, Gilbert and I with discretion, Bertha with more zeal than judgment, for she wearied herself in hunting after the commonest specimens, and brought armfuls into the boat of the sea-weed which abounded at our very doors at home, and contributed her lapful of shells, which I should not have cared to pick up, because I could gather them by the bushel at any time I pleased upon the shore before our house. But Gilbert never scolded her, and I took my cue from him, and we quietly separated the rare specimens and left the rest behind us. Then we all talked together till the fading light warned us to return, and I was anxious to fulfil my promise to mamma.

Not one of us had a watch ; but Gilbert said it was earlier than it seemed, for the evening was closing in very heavily ; "and," he added, "there will be a storm sooner than I thought, Miss Margaret : those clouds behind the Tor mean mischief, and the air feels more sultry-like than it did an hour ago. Bertha, child, pack up those tea-cups, and hand the kettle over ; we must set out without a moment of delay. Miss Margaret and Alice, please settle yourselves at once. I am so sorry, but we are so shut in here with these towering rocks, and I was so keen to find the scarlet weed the Doctor told me of this morning, that I never noticed the change up aloft. If we make haste, however, we'll get the "Little Gipsy" harboured in the creek before the storm comes on."

But before we had neared the great bare headland of the giant Tor, we heard a solemn voice come pealing from afar, its echoes dying mutteringly upon the darkening waves. At the same time the gloom grew deeper, and Gilbert, who, I thought, looked very anxious, said, "The wind is getting up."

CHAPTER IV.

THE WRECK OF THE "LITTLE GIPSY."

AND the wind was getting up,—slowly, indeed, and almost imperceptibly to any but a practised ear; but presently there came a low, shuddering moan across the waves, which began to rise and fall very hurriedly; our flag, which had drooped idly all the afternoon, began to flutter famously, our sail commenced to fill, and ere long we could hear the roar of the advancing tide,—which, however, would not be at flood till nearly midnight,—and the breeze swept shrilly all around us, mingling its weird blast with the scream of the sea-birds, who were evidently looking forward to the tempest with exhilarated spirits.

Gilbert gathered in the sails, and said it would be hard work till we had doubled the Tor, but we must depend upon our oars; and he gave several directions to Bertha, which, nautical as I was in my experiences, I could not comprehend. I volunteered to take an oar, for I could row very well in tolerably calm water; and he replied, "Not now, Miss Margaret; I can do all there is to be done at present; and your tender little hands would not do much in this strong current; but if I have more than I can manage, I'll ask you to help me, I promise you. There's another pair of sculls underneath the seat;—I only hope we may not want them."

"Do you think we shall, Gilbert?"

"That depends, Miss Margaret, upon what way we make before the storm is on us. If we can get round the Tor, and well set towards the shore before the tempest bursts, it will be all well; but, you know, we have to make such a bend, and get out so far to avoid the reef;—and then the bar that stretches from the Head right into St. Eldred's Bay. We've got to go against tide for a good mile yet, and this wind, which is dead against us, keeps us back."

"Do let me take the sculls, Gilbert; I am sure you might trust me."

"I know I might, Miss Margaret, and do; for didn't I teach you to handle them myself? But"—and he spoke in a low concentrated whisper,—"keep your strength, Miss Margaret; *you may want it.*"

I felt awed and a little afraid, though I did not anticipate any real danger. But the darkness thickened rapidly, and the waves grew more and more turbulent; and presently, looking out sea-wards, we saw only a waste of tumbling waters of inky blackness in the livid light that fell from the edges of that pall-like cloud. But every wave swept upwards with a crest of snowy foam, making the sable hollow all the darker from the contrast. The coast lay far away, like dream-land; only on the great shaggy Head of the weather-beaten Tor there fell one lingering beam of pallid sunshine, showing us all the huge wrinkles, and scars, and airy recesses of the mighty pile of rock. Frowningly, I thought, the solemn Tor looked down upon us, as, keeping at a respectful distance from the long, sharp reef which ran out from his foot, we silently toiled on across that restless sea, on which our tiny bark seemed no better than a cockle-shell. By-and-by, when I looked again, that pale, cold, lingering beam was gone, and the Tor stood up like Giant Despair, in the fast-increasing gloom, and I could scarcely see the face of Bertha at the other end of the boat. Then the heavens seemed to open, and all the sea, and all the land from cape to cape of that wide Bay, and all the sullen sky, was turned to fire; but only for a moment, and then came the most awful, crashing thunder and midnight darkness on the foaming waters.

I hid my face in terror, for I had never seen such lightning, or heard such deafening thunder; and involuntarily I thought of the day of days that was hasting on, even the great day of the Lord, when the heavens shall pass away with a great noise, and the elements shall melt with fervent heat. And again and again came the fiery levin, and the mingled roar of waves and thunder, and we could make no way against the terrific wind and the surging tide that drove us inland close upon the great Tor reef. I had the sculls

now, and laboured with all my might; and Gilbert strained every nerve; and Bertha, though she was crying bitterly, kept to her post, and obeyed the commands of her brother, as he shouted them through the uproar of the storm.

At last, however, the boat became perfectly unmanageable; the helm no longer answered; it was fruitless spending all our strength in rowing against that mighty wind and tide, and we could only let ourselves drift away in the direction of the dreaded sunken rocks. Every minute the huge black Tor drew nearer, and we knew that any moment the "Little Gipsy" might strike and be shivered into spars.

"It is of no use," said Gilbert, laying down his oar. "Miss Margaret, don't kill yourself tugging with those sculls; it's of no mortal use: we have done all we can!"

"What must we do then? You don't mean—?"

"I mean that we must cry to the Lord to help us, for we cannot help ourselves, and the winds and the waves are too much for us; only, Miss Margaret, HE holds the winds in the hollow of His hand, and He can say to these raging waves, '*Be still!*'"

"The Lord is mightier than the noise of many waters," said Alice. "Don't fear, Bertha; you know we read those very words this morning."

"But people have been drowned," sobbed Bertha; "and it may be God's will that we should go down."

"And if it be," said Alice, "all is well—if,—if—" She looked at me, and at Bertha, and I knew what she meant. It would be well with her; for Alice was of those who are safe for evermore under the shadow of the Almighty wings,—safe in life and safe in death, at peace now and for evermore. And I knew, but yet could not comprehend, the secret of this never-ending peace; I knew the sublime truths on which that sweet peace rested, but they were to me as a noble-sounding poem in a language I had never listened to before.

"Oh, Miss Margaret," cried Gilbert, "what would I not give to see you safe on shore! What will the doctor feel! and my own mother and father! Oh, Alice, it is terrible!"

Alice drew near, and whispered something, which in the wild uproar of wind, and wave, and thunder, I could not catch. But I saw him take her hand, and the brother and sister looked into each other's eyes, and the calm that rested on the girl's pale face was reflected in Gilbert's serious dark eyes and in the quiet smile that flitted for an instant over his boyish features. They were words of faith and comfort that passed between the pair,—of that I felt assured; but I could conceive of nothing that could give one real consolation in such extremity.

Suddenly there was a shock, and a harsh, grating sound, and we knew that the "Little Gipsy" had struck. The thunder was growing fainter, and the lightning less vivid, but the sea was literally boiling over the submerged reef, and the great Tor was right ahead of us. Before we could say a word, before Bertha had risen from the nearly prostrate position into which the violent concussion had thrown her, we felt, rather than saw, that the boat was filling.

"It is all over with the 'Little Gipsy,'" said Gilbert, mournfully; "but we are so near the shore, that I may perhaps save you. If we could but get upon that rock!"

"What rock, Gilbert?"

"The rock we call St. Eldred's Pulpit; it is not often quite under water, and this is only an ordinary tide. The sides are steep and slippery, but, once on the smooth, square platform at top, I think we could manage."

As he spoke he stepped from the leaky boat, telling us to bale out the water as long as we could, for the leak was small at present, though the cracking went on, and the bows of the "Little Gipsy" were straining fiercely in the surging current.

Gilbert was up to the waist, but his feet, he cried, were on the solid rock, and he thought he could reach the Pulpit. I saw him look up for an instant to the wild sky above, and I knew that the look went far beyond the heavy storm-clouds into the heaven of heavens itself. That solemn, uplifted glance, that upraised hand, told me that he committed himself and us to the Great Ruler of the mighty deep, the

Father, in whose care he trusted to bring him, if so it seemed well, to the haven where he would be.

In a few minutes Gilbert had safely reached the little Patmos, where he thought we perhaps might find a refuge, and, throwing out the coil of rope which he had carried across his arm, it was skilfully caught by Bertha, and, in spite of many difficulties, we were drawn so near St. Eldred's Pulpit that, only ancle-deep, we could scramble across the rocks to the place where Gilbert stood. And then, for awhile at least, we were safe; we sat on the broad slab, which might have accommodated a dozen persons, the spray, indeed breaking over us every minute, but the waves at some distance below our feet. The tide, Gilbert knew, would not naturally rise so high as the surface of the rock; but it was possible that the furious gale which had arisen might drive the waves far above regular water-mark. Still, he imagined, if the worst came to the worst, we might cling to each other, and, holding on till the tide began to turn, escape with a thorough drenching.

For the drenching we had not to wait long; our feet were wet enough when we left the leaky boat; and now, with every rising wave, the spray dashed over us, and, the necessity for exertion and the great stress of excitement being past, we began to suffer severely from the cold. A forlorn group we were, sitting there on the bare island rock; above us, the lofty precipices of the Tor, and all around us the seething waves, coming every minute nearer and nearer, and, as it seemed to our apprehensions, with increased fury, their white crests looking like tossing manes of some fierce, wild animal rushing upon us to tear us limb from limb. And we all thought of the dear ones at home; I wept as I thought of papa and mamma, out in the storm, pacing the wind-swept beach, and straining their eyes over the darkened, tossing sea, looking for the little boat that held their one great treasure,—the little boat they knew so well that they would never see again, for she was fast grinding to pieces on the sharp, cruel rocks on which she had stranded immediately after we deserted her. And Gilbert and Alice, too,

had parents, who would watch in agony for their return; and Alice, so frail, so weak, so easily exhausted, how would she bear this exposure, and all the terrible excitement to which she had been subjected? Gilbert, I could see, was very anxious for her, and he sheltered her as well as he was able, holding her in his arms, and telling her to lean on him, for he knew she must be suffering. Then, too, the boat was gone,—the boat which had been the chief source of all their humble gains;—what would become of the unfortunate Tredgolds, thus bereft of the means of following out their trade. And I felt that the expedition had been originally planned to please *me:* if I had not coveted those purple-lined *tellinæ* and the rare *echinus*, which I was told could be found on our coast only at the cove we had so unhappily visited, the "Little Gipsy" would have been rocking safely in her land-locked bay in the sheltered creek; I should have been at home to hear papa's explanation of some phenomena of the storm, and Gilbert and his sister would probably have been securely sheltered by their own fireside.

"Oh, that we had never come!" I said, excitedly wringing my wet, benumbed hands in my distress. "Oh, Gilbert, why did God let us come?"

"Hush, Miss Margaret, dear!" said Alice, in her sweet voice, raising her drooping head. "Do not let us question God's providence. What He does *must* be best! Our Father loves us too well needlessly to make us suffer."

"How can it be for the best, losing the boat, risking our lives, making all our friends miserable on our account?"

"We cannot see *how* it is; we must trust. It will all come plain in time; or, if not in time, in eternity."

"Thanks, Alice, thanks," murmured Gilbert; "my faith was growing sadly weak when you began to speak. We cannot see our way; we must be content to trust and wait; yes: as we shall have to trust and wait many a time again, if God spare our lives. One does not make the voyage of life without storms, and wrecks, and perplexities, and darkness; but, by the grace of God, I trust we shall all

come safe into port at last, and praise Him through whom and in whom we have surmounted the dangers of the way."

"But, Gilbert," cried Bertha, "what can we do without the boat?"

"It seems just now, we can do nothing,—the future looks very dark indeed; but as we did not lose the dear old boat by any carelessness of our own—as we were not occupied in any sinful pursuit—I think we may trust to God to make it all straight for us. And yet, it is hard. I loved every spar and plank in the "Little Gipsy;" I had rather have her back again than the trimmest, tightest craft that swims the sea. She has been like a sister to me all these years, and now—she is all to pieces!"

And poor Gilbert—for he was only a boy after all, though hard shifts and buffetings had made a man of him in some respects—covered his face in his hands and wept bitterly. The author's affection for the child of his creation is not deeper or tenderer than the sailor-boy's for the boat in which he has passed a large portion of his days,—which he has guided from his early childhood. And I knew—none better—how Gilbert loved the shabby, often-repaired "Little Gipsy," and how the old fisherman his father looked upon her nearly as one of his children. And now—she would never skim the sea again; never sit curtseying upon the rippling waves on sunny summer mornings; never come home when the moonlight was fading from the Tor's bold brow, and the ruddy streaks of dawn were striking the blue waters,—laden with the spoils of the ocean; her little flag would never, never more flutter on the evening breeze; her well-patched sail would never swell in prosperous gales. *Could* all this be for the best? The storm died off at last; the thunder pealed, softly but solemnly, far, far away; beautiful, harmless flashes of lightning played along the distant hills, and by-and-by the stars came out, the sky was clear again, and Gilbert told us it was almost eleven o'clock. The sea was not much calmer, for the tide was not yet at flood; but we wondered that no boat came in search of us.

Then it came into my mind that twenty boats might be out looking for us, and they might pass us by, for we could make no signal, and the waves dashed high about us;—should we be there till morning, and could we bear it? would it not be the death of Alice Tredgold; the source of long suffering and danger to us all? While I pondered, and we all kept mournful silence, the waves dashing frightfully near our feet, and yet a full hour before high water, we heard a heavy boom very near at hand.

"It is a ship in trouble," said Gilbert at once, "and she is only just round Point Cheyne. She has struck upon the Long Reef. And, hark, hark! surely I heard a shout! That was not the wind, or the waves in the caverns of the Tor;—they are come to look for us."

We strained our eager eyes through the gloom and the blinding spray, and at length we discerned, not far from us, a large, strong boat, apparently well manned, struggling among the breakers. We united in one grand shout, but, exhausted as we were, our voices were utterly drowned in the wild commotion of the dashing tide. Even Gilbert's strongest "Ahoy there!" died quiveringly upon the wind ere yet it left St. Eldred's Pulpit.

But Bertha said, suddenly, "One of the oars is here,—the tide has floated it up; can we not make a signal? they might see something in the starlight!"

No sooner said than done,—my white cape was fastened to the oar and waved aloft. It was seen, for the boat came nearer, and very quickly we could hear voices. Surely our Father in Heaven had bidden the careless waves to bear to us that floating, friendly oar; without it we had been powerless to attract attention.

In a few minutes the boat was close at hand, for the water was deep enough now, and she rode safely far above the rocks. We crawled down what were called the Pulpit-steps, and were lifted into the boat; even Gilbert had nearly lost the power of motion.

The men who came for us were our neighbours at North Combe, and I heard one of them say, "Here she is, doctor,

all safe!" And I was in my father's arms, and his warm tears were on my ice-cold face.

I lay there quiet and happy, and heard them say that a great ship had run aground upon the Reef, and that all the boats were out to try to save the crew;—all but that one chartered by my own dear father.

CHAPTER V.

IN THE EAST ROOM.

STRONG as our boat was, and well manned, we had no small difficulty in doubling the projecting reef which stretched out in a dozen or more little capes or points from the wave-beaten base of the great dark Tor. There was a glimmering of dawn in the sky, a faint light on the eastern hills, when, coming at last into St. Eldred's Bay, we saw a large ship plunging madly to and fro among the breakers. A gallant vessel she was, and our crew were saying that she was homeward bound, and an East Indiaman, making for the great port of Southam. She had struck two hours before, and was gradually grinding to pieces on the cruel rocks, no boats being able as yet to get alongside of her.

Gilbert sprang up, as, looming through the dusky, early dawn, he saw the rigging and masts of the ill-fated vessel; she was rocking terribly, and sometimes rolling as if she would turn topsy-turvy and go down head-foremost. He turned round to Charley Green, who was tugging gallantly at one of our oars, and said, "Charley, she's on the Serrars!"

Now, the Serrars were a series of chains of sharp, saw-like rocks, scarcely hidden at neap, and not very deeply submerged even at an ordinary spring-tide, and at low water they appeared very plainly, and had been christened long, long ago,—nobody knew how long,—"The Sierras," by a Spaniard who had lived for many years in the neighbour-

hood of St. Eldred's. He called them so because he fancied they were an exact miniature representation of the far-famed Morena Crags of his own beloved land of the olive and the vine; and with all an exile's passionate yearning for the country of his birth, he rejoiced in anything that reminded him of the scenery to which he had been accustomed in his childish days. He used to go out at low water to his "Sierras," as he persisted in calling the brown, serrated rocks, and, landing on some portion of the reef, delight himself with tracing out even to the minutest point the resemblance between it and his own far distant mountains. But one unlucky evening—so the story ran—his little boat drifted away from its slight moorings, the tide was rising fast, and it was an equinoctial spring, and the shadows of night were falling fast on sea and shore. The next morning the body of the Spaniard was washed up on the beach very near to Kelver House, and his boat was picked up by some fishermen very near the little town of Chell, some twenty miles further down our coast.

The rocks kept the name that poor Olivas had given them; but in process of time, as might have been expected, the Spanish word was corrupted, and the reef had been called "The Serrars" for nearly half a century when we first came to live at North Combe.

And a dreadful reputation the Serrars had; though, being out of the way of general navigation, it was not often they had an opportunity of distinguishing themselves; but if once any hapless vessel grounded on them, she was pretty sure to go to pieces, and the saving of the crew was a feat of bravery and skill, if, indeed, it could be accomplished.

"Yes, indeed! and she is!" responded Charley Green, a man like dried seaweed, and a special friend of mine. "How she do rock and heave! And if I don't mistake, she's drifted on to the very worst bit of the reef she could pick out, though very bad is the best. She's struggling with the Shark's Teeth." This was the name of one special rock right in the middle of that dreadful reef, and the name was about the best that could be given it.

"She is," said Gilbert. "Charley, she must go to bits: nothing on earth could save her. But the crew! What boats are out?"

"Old Lobb's boat went out as soon as ever she"—pointing to the vessel—"made signals; and then the Mays—father and son—set off; and last of all the "Betsy Jane" put off; but, there, what's the use?"

"There never was a ship in worse quarters," said Gilbert, slowly; "but how about her own boats?"

"We can't tell; there hasn't been light enough to see from stern to bows of this here little craft; only, if she did let down her boats, they'd strike at once and be swamped in a jiffy. Nothing could live on the Serrars in such a sea. I see it coming hours ago, and I watched the storm get up, and was just going to try what I could do with my mates, when the doctor comes and tells me all about Miss Margaret being out; and I concluded to go with him, for, thinks I, charity begins at home—my neighbours first, and then the foreigners. So I came, and I don't know nothing of the other boats!"

Meanwhile my father was holding me in his arms, and I was gathering fresh warmth and life from that dear embrace; and slowly, slowly the eastern sky was brightening, and in the solemn light of dawn we saw the great ship beating about very near us. Already her timbers were shivering and splitting in every direction, and the hull seemed to start and shudder, like a human being in mortal agony. As the light grew we could see that the crew were taking to their own boats; no others were near: it was evident that the vessel would be a perfect wreck in less than half-an-hour.

"If they would only stay on board, they might be saved," said Bertha, who was standing now by Gilbert, forgetting her own drenched, pitiable condition in the excitement of the moment.

"No, Bertha; I am afraid not: there will be water enough for the next two hours to drown them every one. Look! the main-deck is swept away. If it hadn't been the Shark's Teeth she'd got upon, one might have trusted; but that's

the worst bit of all the reef. The top of it is never seen but at very lowest tides, and the water there is always very deep. Doctor! if we were but a few yards nearer, we might do something!"

Before my father could reply, a cry—oh, such a cry of anguish!—swept across the waves. The boat we had seen just filled went down with all its freight of struggling, terrified human creatures. One moment the indistinct forms of the people crowding into the boat—the next, only foaming waves, with snowy crests and cavernous black hollows!

There was a groan from all the men in our boat. It was horrible to see it all,—to be so near at hand, and yet unable to render any help. We looked over the restless water, and only the solemn boom went on, and the white crests rose and fell, and the early twilight brooded over the dark abysses that had gathered to their depths some score or more of our hapless fellow-creatures. Another day was dawning fresh and fair; soon the glad sunlight would sparkle cheerily on land and sea, and the wild, fierce waves would be lulled to rest once more, and the lark would sing her morning anthem of praise, and the fishermen would come down to the beach to look for the wreck that last night's storm had made, and all the busy world around and beyond St. Eldred's would go on its way as carelessly, as actively as ever; but those who had hoped ere long to join the household band, and soon to clasp hands after weary years of absence, would sleep on undisturbed till the sea should give up her dead.

Very soon we were safely landed, and there were mamma and Susan on the beach waiting for us. Mamma strained me to her heart in a perfect agony of thankfulness,—she had not words for gratitude or welcome. Susan kissed me boisterously, and hugged me in her brawny arms till I had to gasp for breath; then she began to scold me furiously, as if I were responsible for the storm that had wrought such awful mischief: and I was glad to seize upon Alice and Bertha, and drag them after me into the house. There we were all petted, and made much of; and Mrs. Tredgold suddenly appeared upon the scene, and would have taken

her daughters home had not mamma sternly forbidden her to risk her children's lives.

So we were all undressed and put to bed like babies, such measures being taken as would go far to prevent the evils which were likely to accrue from our long exposure. I only know that my feet were literally pickled in salt, and mustard, and hot water, and my throat scalded with posset, which Susan compelled me to swallow at nearly boiling point. I soon fell asleep, too soundly for dreams, and when at length I woke and looked out, I knew by the light upon the cliffs it must be already noon. No vestige of the stately ship I had seen rocking on the fatal Serrars could I perceive. The water was still rough, but the sky was serene and intensely blue, and the air, cleared by the tempest of the previous night, blew refreshingly over the Bay. The house was very still,—it might have been midnight instead of noon; and I wondered what had become of Gilbert, and whether Alice and Bertha Tredgold had gone home.

I determined to dress, and go down as quickly as possible; and while I was looking for my clothes, which I could not easily find, Susan crept on tip-toe into the room.

"Now, I declare!" was her salutation. "I never did see such a troublesome child in all my life. Wasn't you put to bed, Miss Margaret, and told expressly as you was to lie there till you were told to get up again?"

"That was so long ago, Susan, and I have had a fine sleep, and now I am quite well, and I cannot lie in bed in the day-time unless I am sick."

"Get you into bed, Miss Margaret, this instant. If the master could see you standing there with your naked feet, and you nearly drownded last night!"

"Oh, tell me, Susan, how is papa?"

"I won't tell you nothing, if you don't get into bed again this minute, you naughty girl."

Under compulsion, therefore, I returned to my couch, and Susan drew the bed-clothes over me, and tucked me in as securely as she had often done ten years before on freezing Christmas nights.

"But, Susan, I am hungry, and I have had no breakfast."

"To be sure you haven't. We've been in and out—the missis and me—twenty times, but you were always as sweetly asleep as flowers on a summer-night. The missis wanted you to be waked, that you might have some food; but the master said you were to sleep on till you awoke of yourself, and you were on no account to be disturbed. But now I'll bring you a cup of coffee and an egg in no time."

"One minute, Susan dear,—is papa the worse for last night?"

"Well, you couldn't expect him to be any better for it; we are all the worse of it,—I'm that trembling I can scarcely stand. I do hope, Miss Margaret, this will be a warning to you."

"A warning against what, Susan?"

"Against being so wilful and tomboy-like, Miss Margaret. You aren't a bit like a young lady. Them Tredgolds are all very well, but you are Miss Torrington, and the Torringtons are as good a family as any in the country, and your great grandfather—"

"Oh, please do not tell me that again, Susan; I really care nothing about my great grandfather;—only I hope he is safe in heaven. Tell me all about papa and mamma. And where are Alice and Bertha?"

To which Susan only replied by patting the bed-clothes well down about my shoulders, and promising that I should know everything when I had eaten something. I pleaded hard to get up there and then, but was informed that such a proceeding was not to be thought of, and that I could not be disobedient, since shoes, and stockings, and frock, and other habiliments were not in the room.

And, triumphantly nodding, Susan went away, and I lay for another quarter of an hour, going over and over again the terrible adventure in which I had borne a part, and wishing mamma would make her appearance. But presently Susan appeared with a tray, and I was quite ready to sit up and eat what had been provided. When I had finished my egg and toast, and drunk every drop of the delicious coffee

Susan had prepared, I found that I might ask questions without reprimand, and I discovered also that Susan was brimming over with intelligence which she was really eager to impart. So while I trifled with my strawberries I commenced my catechism. "Now, Susan, where is papa; and is he at all poorly?"

"He is not to call well, Miss Margaret. How should he be, just worrited to death with fright, and anxiety, and setting up all night? But he is lying down now, and I hope he is asleep."

"And mamma?"

"Your mamma is very tired, of course. I'm sure I wonder we are not all confined to our beds after what we've been going through. It was bad enough having you skylarking off in the most tremendous thunder-storm I ever remember; but it was a downright shame for that ship to come and get wrecked down there on the Serrars, under our very eyes as it were; and I'm sure one might think Dr. Torrington kept a marine hotel, the house is so full with the living and the dead!"

"The *dead!* Oh, Susan, you don't mean—?"

"There now, how you look! There's nothing the matter, my lamb, only I'm a stupid old gowk, and I'd ought to have known better than blab it out like that, and you all but drownded twelve hours ago."

"But, Susan, there is not really anybody dead?"

"Nobody you ever saw, my dear; but a poor lady and a little girl were washed up from the wreck. The little girl was brought to with hot bottles and all sorts of remedies; but the lady was quite dead—her head had had a blow on the rocks, the doctor said, else she might have been recovered from the water. And she is lying downstairs, my dear, in the little east room we never use. You shall see her when you come down."

"I cannot," I gasped out. "Oh, Susan! I don't like death; it is terrible, and I cannot bear to see it."

"But, my dear lamb, death comes to everybody in turn; it was very near coming to you, Miss Margaret, last night."

As I thought how near, I shuddered. But for one or two things, I too might have been lying cold and mute,—perhaps in that very bed; perhaps deep down among the weeds at the bottom of the sea. Oh! to die and leave the pleasant world, the sparkling waters, and the sunny hills, and the dear familiar voices of my home.

Susan resumed, "If we were like butterflies or caterpillars, Miss Margaret, and could be crushed out for ever, death would be a very dreadful thing indeed,—it would just be the end of everything; but we have another life beyond this, and I sometimes think, my dear, it is all as if this life was so many dark, winding passages, through which we must grope our way till we reach the heavenly temple that we read about in Revelations. I heard a minister say once, that our life here was only a beginning, and very small and poor, as beginnings mostly are, and to be carried on gloriously and perfectly in the world to come. I mind when you were ever such a little lass and had your first copy-book, and the master was teaching you straight lines and pot-hooks, *you* called it writing, and you thought it was; but we knew that it was only scrawls that would turn into writing by-and-by. The pot-hooks and scrawls were only training like; and so I do believe all we do here, that we fancy is so grand, is but just getting ready for eternity. My training is in the kitchen, and it is all cooking and cleaning, and faithful service; yours is in the parlour a-learning of your tasks; the missis's is up-stairs, and downstairs, and everywhere; and the master's is mostly in the world, doing good to poor people's bodies and souls: but it will all come to the same end some day; leastways, I hope it will."

"Did the lady belong to the little girl, Susan?"

"Yes, Miss Margaret; she was the child's mother, as anybody could have told who saw them both. But the little one does not know that her mother is dead; she only knows that she was very much hurt, and that she is very ill. Missis is afraid of telling her on a sudden—she looks so delicate; why, Miss Margaret, she's for all the world like a snowdrop."

"Is she in the house, then?"

"Yes; and when the doctor says you may get up, you had better go and see her; she is in a peck of trouble—poor little thing!—about her mamma; her poor heart misgives her that something sad is the matter."

"I am quite well now, Susan; do bring my clothes."

"Well, you really look yourself; so you shall get up. It will do the missis's heart good to see you up and about again, and none the worse for being half-drownded. And you can talk to the little girl; children mostly understand each other: but she speaks queer English like. It is English, for I can make it out, which I couldn't if it was any foreign lingo; but she says she has lived in France a long time."

I was soon dressed; and, going down, I passed quickly by the closed east-room door, and was hurrying on to the parlour we usually occupied, when some strange impulse led me to turn back and compel myself to face that from which I shrank.

Tremblingly I turned the lock, and stood within the twilight room. There was nothing to scare me, nothing even to distress me. Everything was as I had seen it when last I visited the chamber; only on the old-fashioned horsehair sofa lay a white draped figure, and the shutters were partly closed.

I folded them back, and then slowly and reverently I lifted the sheet, and saw a sweet, pale face with closed eyes, two white hands meekly folded, and long rippling waves of pale, golden hair falling around the placid, settled features, that told me at a glance of weariness gone by, and present rest. It was a lovely face on which I gazed, yet careworn and pensive; but a strange light seemed brooding over its fixed, sad aspect,—a light that was not of this world, I felt confident. I knew that the parted spirit was rejoicing now in heaven's own sunshine, and involuntarily I thought of those precious words, "As for me, I will behold Thy face in righteousness; I shall be satisfied when I awake with Thy likeness."

"*Satisfied!*"—yes, that was it. That was what the pale,

sweet face expressed: toil past, sorrow ceased, shadows melted into glorious light, the mystery of life complete, and, above all, *rest*,—perfect, never-ending-rest. I feared the dead no more; even death itself seemed to wear a strange and solemn beauty; and, looking on the sleeping form, I thought again of what Gilbert had said to me about the voyage of life. Child as I was, I felt that the woman who lay before me with closed eyelids and mute lips, the woman whom I had never seen in life, of whose very existence I had not been cognizant an hour before, had encountered many a storm upon the waves of this world's ever-restless, ever-changing sea. And now I felt assured she had reached the *haven* so long, so patiently desired. I sank on my knees by that quiet form and prayed—"O, God! I am weak and ignorant. Lead me safe through all the storms of life, and bring *me* at last to the haven of eternal rest, even thine own bright land. For Jesus Christ's sake. Amen."

I spoke that holy name reverently, and I bowed my head, as I had always seen my parents and Susan bow theirs, at the mention of that blessed name, which is above every other name; but, though I believed intellectually in the Christ, mighty and merciful to save all who came to Him, I did not take Him for my own Lord. I prayed *through* Him, because I had been so taught; but I did not receive Him into my heart as the one sole source of rest, and joy, and blessing. He was the world's Saviour, but not my own; only I knew it not.

CHAPTER VI.

MIRIAM.

I RECLOSED the shutters, covered over the peaceful face, and left the room, no one knowing that I had visited it. Then I bent my steps to the parlour, where I expected to find mamma. She was sitting there, but not in her usual seat, not with her basket of work before her, busily plying

needle and thread, or shears, but by the sofa, reading aloud to a little childish creature—a mere baby, I thought at first —who lay there very pale and still,—a little waxen image of the dead woman by whose side I had watched and prayed. It needed not that any one should tell me that this was the daughter of the poor lady who had perished in the wreck.

There was a quiet, fervent embrace between my mother and me, and then she gently put me away. I at once knew why: it was not kind or seemly that we should flourish our happiness before the motherless child, for whom such precious interchange of look, and clasp, and word, had passed away for ever.

"Here is a little sister for you," said mamma, lifting the child into her lap. "Margaret, you have often wished for a sister, you know—a sister younger than yourself; and I told you I thought you would never have one. Now, you see, God has granted your desire. He has sent you little Miriam, and you will be very good to her, and love her dearly, I am certain."

I looked at Miriam, and, meeting the soft, shy blue eyes which were lifted to mine timidly, yet hopefully, I saw that she was no babe, but a child only three or four years younger than myself. She had, indeed, just entered her eleventh year. At the same time, it occurred to me that this was not precisely the kind of sister I had desired. I had wished that mamma might have another baby, whom it would be my pride and pleasure to nurse, and tend, and teach, and love to adoration; and I could scarcely accept as a sister one who was no flesh and blood of mine—a real waif and stray, tossed up by the waves upon our shore. I am afraid my looks said as much; for the blue eyes dropped, and a deeper shade passed over the small, pale face while mamma smoothed tenderly the long, golden ringlets that hung like a veil about the tiny figure. I dare say I looked very awkward standing there, a great overgrown girl, with a strong inclination to bite my finger-ends from sheer uncertainty as to the best way of disposing of them. I know I

felt awkward enough, contrasting my ungainly form, all legs and arms, and shoulders poking themselves into positions achieved only by those luckless beings—fast-growing girls and boys,—contrasting, I say, my own rebellious members with the elegant proportions of the little fairy queen, with my mother's arm around her, and thinking of my own dark, crisp curls, while I admired the soft, shining spirals of the golden-tressed maiden who had appeared thus suddenly among us.

But it was necessary to say something, and I did not wish to appear or even to be in my heart ungracious: I was quite ready to lecture myself for coldness and incipient jealousy; but then, if any one else should presume to lecture me on the same score, I was also quite ready to flash out in one of those tempers that made my mother sad, and brought a frown to my father's smooth, calm brow, and incited Susan to the declaration, "that Miss Margaret was *a limb!*" So I said, "Who is Miriam, mamma?"

"I can hardly tell you yet," was my mother's reply. "Her father was an officer, and died in the Mauritius several years ago; since then she has been living in France, and came to England in the "Hirondelle" that was wrecked last night upon the Serrars."

"When may I see mamma?" said Miriam, quietly. Her tone was steady, and, though tears were in her eyes, they did not fall, but her whole frame was quivering with the effort she made to suppress emotion.

"Presently, dear,—not yet," was mamma's answer; and I saw her arm pressed more closely round the childish form. Miriam suddenly slid down from her knees and stood before her, and in the same sad, gentle tone of self-repression continued:—"I know, *madame*, that my dear mamma will never speak to me again. I know she is what people call dead, or she would have come to me, or sent for me, long ago. You have been afraid, dear, kind madame, to tell me; but I knew it all the time."

How quaint and old-fashioned she was in her way of speaking, and her words were uttered slowly, and with great

precision, as I found afterwards because she had spoken French so continually for three years as to give her own tongue the style and accent of an acquired language. Mamma had tried to speak to her in French, but Miriam's French was as strange to Mrs. Torrington as Cingalese or Sanscrit, while Miriam could only make out a word or two of the several carefully-prepared sentences which her new friend enunciated. It was decidedly better, therefore, to carry on the conversation in English.

"May I not go to mamma?" still pleaded the quiet, childish voice. "I will be so good,—oh, so good! *chère bonne madame.* I will not cause you to be troubled in the least."

"My dear child," was the answer; "it is for yourself I am afraid,—you are still very weak and trembling; wait a little till I speak to the doctor."

At that moment papa entered the room, and, drawing me to his side, he took Miriam on his knee, and listened gravely to her request. He looked at her for several minutes, and held her tiny hand in his; then he said, "Maggie! I think it will be best for her to let her do as she wishes."

Miriam looked her thanks, and then urged—"if only it might be permitted that I go alone to my dear mamma!"

"Dear child," replied my father, "I am afraid for you to be quite alone,—you do not know what you ask;—I will take you with me, and I will stay at the other end of the room, and not disturb you."

Obediently she took papa's hand, and walked away with him, and, while she was absent from the room, mamma told me all the particulars she had been able to glean from the child herself. "But I thought the vessel was an East Indiaman?" I said, remembering what I had heard the crew of our boat saying the night before.

"So she was originally; but she had passed into the hands of a St. Louis trader, and she had conveyed a cargo to Marseilles, and from thence was bound for Southam. Mrs. Downing and her little girl came in her from the Mediterranean;—a few more hours, and they would have been in

port;- -the storm came, the "Hirondelle" was an old, scarcely seaworthy ship,—and you know what happened!"

"Then her name is Downing,—Miriam Downing?"

"So she says, and, indeed, we found that out when we were undressing her; all her linen, most delicately fine, and beautifully made, was marked '*Miriam Downing.*' The mother's things were also marked 'M. D.,' but the child says her name was Mary."

"And what did they come to England for?"

"Miriam scarcely knows: only she is sure her mamma wanted to find out a brother of her own, a Mr. King, a rich merchant, but whether of Southam or of London the little girl could not tell. There was evidently a family misunderstanding; I should think Mrs. Downing married to displease her family, as people say, for Miriam knows nothing at all about this Uncle Cuthbert or about any of her mamma's relations. And the poor lady, who seems to have been in declining health ever since her husband's death, said that Uncle Cuthbert was displeased with her; but she thought he would forgive her after all these years of absence, and take care of her only child in case anything happened to herself. She was very ill all through the voyage, Miriam says, and was constantly saying that if English air did not revive her, nothing else would."

"Poor Mrs. Downing! And is Miriam—Miss Downing, to stay with us?"

"Certainly she is for the present. God brought the helpless orphan to our very doors; we cannot, if we would, send her away. Of course, we must try to find out this Uncle Cuthbert."

"That will not be difficult, I should think?"

"We do not know. There have been no communications evidently between Mrs. Downing and her own family since her marriage, which took place at least twelve years ago, as there was a little brother, older than herself, Miriam says, who died in infancy. Mrs. Downing had certainly no idea where this Uncle Cuthbert was to be found. Miriam has a confused notion that she meant to look for him either at Southam or in London, a wide field enough. She is quite

clear that her mamma was very poor, and in her childish way, she explained how she had realized all the little property she possessed, in order to come to England."

"Who was Mr. Downing, and what did he die of?"

"That I do not know. We shall probably find out more in time. Meanwhile, we must take great care of little Miriam, and be very kind to her. Poor child! she has not a relation in the world but this Uncle Cuthbert, whom she has never seen, and of whom she stands in dread, because, as she says, 'he was very angry with mamma, and mamma was always good.' And England is to her a foreign country; she has scarcely set foot upon its soil, for she was carried in early this morning from the wreck."

"Who carried her in, mamma?"

"Old Lobb. He found her just as the wave threw her and her mother on the shore. Some of his mates brought in poor Mrs. Downing, but Lobb himself carried little Miriam in his great strong arms, and the tears were streaming down his weatherbeaten cheeks when he gave her into my charge. He knew that the mother could not be recovered."

"Good old Lobb! he always was a darling, mamma. Some people say he smells all seaweed, but I rather like it. But where are Alice, and Bertha, and Gilbert?"

"Alice and Bertha went home before you were awake. Bertha is pretty well again, but Alice seemed very feeble. I wanted to keep her, but Mrs. Tredgold earnestly requested that they both might return home at once. As for Gilbert he has had quite an adventure!"

"Ah! what was it, mamma?"

"He refused to stay here and be made comfortable after his long toil and drenching. He only lingered just to snatch a piece of bread and drink some hot wine, and then he was out on the beach again. He said he might be of some use, since he felt quite strong again, and no one knew the shore better than he did. So he went off to the wreck with the others."

"And what came to pass? I see he did something brave by your eyes, mamma?"

"He did, I believe, what scarcely anybody else would

have dared to do. The ship was all to pieces, but there still were some persons clinging on to spars and planks; and, as the water became lower, he ventured out himself among those dreadful rocks, and fought with the waves,—for he is a wonderful swimmer, you know,—and he succeeded in saving one of the wrecked passengers, who was just sinking from cold and exhaustion. He brought him safe to land."

"It was a man, then, who was saved by Gilbert?"

"Yes, an elderly gentleman, a Southam merchant, who was returning from Marseilles. His servant, who was also on board, had a very narrow escape, for he was washed ashore as poor Mrs. Downing and Miriam were, and he is so much bruised and beaten that papa feels very uncertain about his recovery."

"Where is the old gentleman, mamma?"

"He is at the Royal Hotel at St. Eldred's, and he insisted that Gilbert should go with him. Your papa saw them both early this morning, and he left Mr. Warden with them."

"Is Gilbert any the worse?"

"He is rather the worse at present; but both papa and Mr. Warden say that, with common care, nothing need be apprehended. The strain on the muscles and the nerves for so many hours could not fail to result in exhaustion afterwards; also, he received some severe bruises, and one terrible cut over the right shoulder. It is wonderful how he contrived to use the arm so long afterwards; besides, he must have lost a tolerable quantity of blood, for the wound was still bleeding when Mr. Warden came to bind it up."

"But, oh, mamma! the worst of all is, that the 'Little Gipsy' has foundered; she went all to pieces on those dreadful rocks on the other side of the great Tor. What will the Tredgolds do?"

"Something will be done for them, I hope. Mrs. Tredgold and Alice were grieved for the boat as for a living creature whom they had loved and lost; but they were both calm and trustful. It had pleased God, they said, to send the storm, which had deprived them of the source of all their little wealth; but it must be for the best. Either they needed the 'Little Gipsy' no more, or some-

thing better would be given them. Their quiet, simple faith was a lesson to me, Margaret."

"Is the old gentleman, whom Gilbert saved, very rich?"

"Probably he is rich, but about the 'very' I cannot give an opinion. You are thinking he may do something for Gilbert? I have thought the same myself, and sincerely hope it may be so; Gilbert deserves all liberality at his hands. But we know nothing of the gentleman's circumstances; he may have many children and even grandchildren, and in such circumstances men are not free to dispose of their own as they otherwise might."

"But, mamma, I think he owes Gilbert some return. Think! Gilbert risked his own life for him—for him, a stranger. I shall hate him if he only give his deliverer bare thanks; of all things I detest ingratitude."

"And yet, my child, are you not sometimes very ungrateful?"

"I, mamma! I could do anything for anybody who had done something for me. All my heart goes out to people who try to do me good and make me happy. Oh, mamma! I do not like to think that you count me ungrateful. I know I do not always seek to please you as I ought; for I owe everything in the world to your love and papa's; but I mean to try, henceforth, to study your wishes better. I had set myself against going to school; but now, if papa and you think it best, I am willing to go, and I will work as hard and patiently as ever I can."

"That is my own brave Margaret! But, dearest, I was not, even in my inmost thoughts, accusing you of ingratitude to your father or to myself. There are some things we would like to see corrected, as you know right well; but you are on the whole an obedient, loving child, and we do not complain. Margaret, my love, you think the gentleman who was saved last night owes much to Gilbert, because he risked his life for him?"

"Who would not, mamma?—and a stranger, too!" But I knew now to what the conversation tended. I saw what mamma meant.

Mamma went on :—"There was One who did more than risk His life; He laid it down not for friends, not for strangers merely, but for foes,—for those who were in rebellion against Him! That life was forfeited for you, Margaret; what return have *you* made?"

I could only hang down my head, and wipe away my fast rising tears. I knew that as yet I had not made the only return which my Heavenly Friend would approve and accept—I had not given Him my heart, my love! I had not presented *myself* a living sacrifice, as my reasonable service unto the Lord. I was not sure that I even wished to give myself up entirely to Him who was at once my King and Saviour, and I knew that the offering, to be pleasing in His eyes, must be voluntary and entire; and yet, but a few hours before, I had been on the brink of another world, and my life had been spared, while others were sleeping the sleep of death underneath those very sparkling waves on which my eyes now rested! Was my heart not hard indeed that I refused,—that I hesitated to consecrate to the merciful Sparer the life which had been snatched from a watery grave?

A little while afterwards papa came back with little Miriam in his arms. The sweet childish face was white and swollen with tears, and papa told us at another opportunity, when he and mamma and I were alone together, how she had flung herself on her dead mother's neck, and kissed the cold lips frantically, and poured out a torrent of passionate lament and farewell in French; and then how she had knelt by the sofa, as it seemed in an agony of prayer, and then how she had risen up very pale and sad, but quite calm, and even with a light shining out from her deep violet eyes,—a light of stedfast hope and perfect trust, and quiet, patient waiting,—a light that seemed to tell how the link between her and the still form upon the sofa was not broken, only loosed—for a little while.

Several days more, and we laid Mrs. Downing to rest in the peaceful churchyard of North Combe. Around her were the green hills and the breezy heights, and the solemn,

ever-changing sea, that chanted day and night its grand *Te Deums* to its Lord and King. And flowers bloomed upon the soft and fragrant turf, and the honey-bee hummed about the grey headstones, and the old church bells chimed out their Sabbath welcome; but she, we knew, was where there "is no more sea," and one eternal day of rest. And Miriam became to my father and mother as another daughter; and sometimes, but not always, I felt that she was my sister.

CHAPTER VII.

A ROOT OF BITTERNESS.

THAT eventful summer quickly faded into autumn. The terrible storm which had wrecked the ill-fated "Hirondelle," and which had given to the winds and waves many a gallant ship besides, seemed to have broken up the weather. For, though we had many fine days afterwards, many pleasant hours of sunny calm and still and fragrant airs, there was not one entire week in many when it did not either blow or rain, or both. The great tempest had disturbed the weather, people said, and we should have no more settled summer for that year.

But autumn came in warm, and fair, and glowing. Once more the blue waters slept under a cloudless sky, and the tide-waves broke in innocent little sprinkles of spray upon the rocks, or danced in shallow curves, like rippling smiles, upon the yellow sand. Every evening the sun went down in royal pomp, turning all the sea to liquid gold and burning crimson, that died away when the great day-god sank beneath the flushing waters into pearly amethystine levels.

And now I went to school in St. Eldred's, and Miriam with me. We left home every morning at nine o'clock, and came back by half-past one to our early dinner. The afternoon classes we did not attend. The Misses Everett were very superior governesses for that day. They did not

profess to teach us practical geometry, or any of the *ologies;* but they taught us very thoroughly all they knew themselves, and were especially well versed in geography and ancient history, and they were perfect dragons at English grammar, and certainly understood their own language to admiration.

I at once took a high place in the school: for I had learnt much from intercourse with my father; and if the limits of my mother's teaching had been rather narrow, all she had imparted had been sound and thorough, so far as it went, and complete in its kind. Thoroughness, rather than range or brilliancy, was the principle of my education both at home and at school; and now in middle life I feel that I cannot be too grateful to those who gave me in all their strength and purity the elements of all I know, or ever shall know in this world. My Latin, too, stood me in good stead with Miss Henrietta, for, of course, I had learned to parse sensibly, and not in the haphazard fashion of many young ladies, who know for the most part a noun, or an adjective, or a verb, but flounder awfully in the matter of mood, and tense, and voice, and have no more real comprehension of syntax than syntax has of them.

Miriam, on the contrary, knew nothing about parts of speech, much less of concords and relative agreements; her geography was limited; her history not much to boast of; and she always came to grief about her sums, figures being to her little more than hieroglyphics. She was nervous, too, and very timid, and very often, from sheer embarrassment, gave a wrong answer when she really knew the right one, or paused so long, blushing and trembling all the time, that she was passed over, and marked down as a defaulter. But her French first delighted and then alarmed her governesses; for she read "Telemaque" as a story-book—the interesting parts at least; and got on into the concluding chapters, "just to see the end of it," she said—where nobody in St. Eldred's had ever been before. Everybody who studied French began "Telemaque," as surely as a person learning the rules of arithmetic went through long vision; but no one ever thought of going far into the

book, or finding out what became of the son of Ulysses after a certain period.

And yet Miriam, though she cut but a very poor figure in the classes, was soon a very great favourite in the school, and I was not. The truth was, I had had my own way a great deal, simply because there was no one at home to contest it with me, and, being accustomed to be first, I could not bear in any way to be second, much less to be lowly rated, or even to be last. It was very good for me, this going to school; for Miriam naturally bent to the older girl and the stronger will, or, perhaps it would be more truthful to say, the more selfish temper: but the young ladies at Hawthorn House took Margaret Torrington precisely as she was, and sneered at her for her untidiness and hoyden ways, and even laughed unkindly at her plain and somewhat shabby dress; and when she was proud and grand, and held her head aloft, they held theirs in the same disdainful mood, and passed remarks about her in her presence that were not complimentary. So Margaret Torrington, in the first weeks of her pupilage, learnt something that she was not taught by book or in class: she learnt sundry painful but salutary lessons; she began to understand that she was held to be uppish and ill-tempered by her companions; that she was not considered any grander or better than other girls; that her judgment was so far from infallible that very little weight was attached to it; that her friendship was not particularly sought by any one; and that, if she would be popular or even comfortable in the school, she must make herself agreeable, refrain from satire generally, and curb her jealous tendencies; lessons even more essential than history or grammar, but far more difficult to learn, and, being learned, far harder to digest. But Miriam everybody loved; even her governesses, though they grieved over her poor capacity, as they deemed it to be, spoke kindly of the child, and even petted her. I told myself that it was very unfair: it was not because she deserved it that she was made so much of, but because of her blue eyes, and golden ringlets, and delicate complexion;

because she was more like a lovely waxen image or a pretty baby than a girl in her eleventh year; because she was an orphan, and because of her black frock and crape rosettes, that reminded everybody of the mournful fact.

Yes, everybody loved little Mirrie! My father used to take her on his knee and look into her beautiful wistful eyes, and kiss her tenderly; and one hot day, when she had fallen asleep in his arms, I heard him say, "God help thee, little Mirrie, in this hard, rough world of ours!" And my mother, though I could not in my jealous heart charge her with one omission towards myself—for I think, sweet soul, she was tenderer than ever to her thankless daughter—seemed to take great pleasure in Miriam's society. She made herself so useful, too: the little fingers could hem and seam, while mine could only cobble and pucker, and that grumblingly. If I tore my frock, my mother must repair it; but if Mirrie, who was as careful as a little old maid, made a rent, she said nothing about it, but straightway set herself, with needle, and thread, and scissors, to mend it deftly. She knew how to embroider common net very prettily, and she won Susan's heart by working her cap strings, and bows, and a special Sunday apron; and if a button was wanting on my father's linen she would say, "Oh, let me do it, auntie"—for that was the name she voluntarily gave mamma. And she would sew it on as firmly and neatly as if she had been a sober married woman, instead of such a morsel of a child that people thought her little more than half her age.

Gradually I began to look upon the little girl as an intruder,—as a rival who was stealing from me the love of my own father and mother,—as one who gained from me the suffrages of my young companions. Insensibly I had grown to esteem myself very highly, and to love and covet the applause of others; and I had held my own so long in the quiet retirement of Kelver House, that I felt wronged and outraged when another shared with me the place that had been mine alone. Sometimes I was fretful and fractious, like a tiresome child; sometimes I brooded over

my trouble, and told myself that I was most unhappy; that it was an ill wind, indeed, which had blown the "Hirondelle," and with it little Mirrie, on our shores.

And why should my parents have kept her? I argued to myself. They were poor, very poor, for their station in life; there were plenty of people in St. Eldred's who could much better afford the burden of another child. True, it might be supposed to be only a temporary charge; for there was this Uncle Cuthbert, who was to come some day and whirl away his tiny niece in a chariot-and-four to unknown wealth and grandeur. But so far Uncle Cuthbert might have been a myth; papa had written to many friends, and to many persons who were not friends, asking about this missing uncle, whose name was all we knew. Papa could only make inquiries for a Mr. King, who had had a sister married to a Mr. Downing, who was something in India—no one knew what—but evidently a gentleman!

Then came advertisements in the *Times*, and the names of Downing and King figured in capital letters once a week for the space of a month or more, and at certain intervals for some months afterwards. And several Downings and several Kings wrote in answer, but not one owned to a *Cuthbert* or to a *Mary* who had married and gone out to India. There seemed every probability of little Miriam being left upon our hands.

One evening I went into the kitchen, and found Susan making a little dough-cake. I immediately concluded it might be for me, though dough-cake was by no means a weakness of mine; I asked her, however, who it was for, feeling very little doubt about the answer.

"It's just for little Mirrie's supper," said Susan, as she put it on the baking-plate, and slammed the oven-door.

Now, gluttony never was a sin of mine; I was sublimely indifferent then, as all properly-fed children are, to what are called the pleasures of the table; but it made me furious that Susan should bake a cake for Miriam, and not for me—her "little mistress," as she had ever called me.

"I think I should like it, Susan," I said, trying to speak quite composedly.

She looked up quickly, the tone of my voice rather than my words betrayed me, and my looks, I suppose, told the tale completely. "Miss Margaret, for shame of you," said Susan, sturdily. "I tell you what it is; some judgment will come upon you, if you go for to oppress the fatherless."

"I don't oppress the fatherless, Susan; I think it is quite the other way. Before she came everybody cared about *me;* now nobody cares. It is she who is to be pleased and petted, not I."

"Goodness, Miss Margaret! the world is big enough for you and she."

"The *world* is, Susan; but Kelver House is not the world; North Combe is not the world; St. Eldred's is not the world. Before that night all care and love was given to me; and now—"

"Miss Margaret," cried Susan, with energy, "do you just know what you're doing of? You are sinning the sin the devil sinned when he was cast out of heaven. Don't you see just what you want for! *It is to be first.* You're never happy, never pleasant, if you're not *first;* and first you can't be always: the Lord never meant any one always to be first and foremost. If you'll just take the place God gives you, you'll be happy; but you'll be miserable, and you'll make others miserable, if you don't alter in these feelings."

"Really, Susan," I replied, "I do not see why I should be lectured by you. It is natural, I suppose, to desire to be first in my own home, and to feel vexed when interlopers take my place."

"No one has taken your place, Miss Margaret; no one wants to take it. But just remember what is written in the Bible: 'Every one that exalteth himself shall be abased, and he that humbleth himself shall be exalted.' Depend upon it, my dear, it is a bad thing to want to be first; it makes a lot of misery in life for one's self and for others. A person that has a jealous, exacting spirit is just a torment to himself, and God don't look with pleasure on such a one!"

And here Susan was called out of the kitchen; somebody wanted to see her at the back-gate, and she was detained some time. Meanwhile, I stood upon the hearth, hot and angry, furious with Susan, feeling unjustly towards everybody, and disliking Miriam from the very bottom of my heart, and at the same time conscious of a certain want of respect for myself. I knew I was behaving most unworthily, but then I argued, I had cause; why did she come and vex me so continually? And how did she vex me? Was she ever cross, or sulky, or presuming? No! but she was pretty, and had gentle ways; and I was a gawky girl, and knew that I was rough in manner. And people called her a thorough little lady, and admired her, and said what an advantage to me her companionship must be; and even papa and mamma seemed to take to her, if not exactly as their own child, as some kith and kin of theirs. Altogether I felt that Miriam injured me; though by word, or look, or action she never did me harm.

By-and-by, as I mused, I was sensible of a certain odour rising from the oven. The fire was very fierce, and I knew Miriam's dough-cake must be scorching, I opened the oven-door and looked in. Yes! the cake was thoroughly done on one side, and growing black on the other. My first and natural impulse was, of course, to take it out, and I even looked round for a cloth to enable me to do so without detriment to my fingers; but second thoughts are not always best, and in this case my second thoughts were, "Why should I trouble myself? Before she came, Susan always thought of me; why should she, a stranger, a dependant, be thus considered? No! the cake may burn; Susan should not have left it." Yet even as I said this in my heart, I hated myself, and felt how unlike a Christian child such conduct was.

A minute or more afterwards, mamma came into the kitchen, and, of course, was saluted immediately with the odour of the scorching pastry. "What is burning in the oven?" you may be sure, were the first words she uttered, and without more ado she opened the oven-door and

rescued the poor little cake, now utterly uneatable, and almost a cinder.

"Did you not perceive it, Margaret?" mamma asked. "I smelt it in the passage, on the other side of the house."

I made no answer, and she looked at me very earnestly: "My dear, what is it?"

"Yes, mamma; I knew it was there."

"And you knew it was spoiling?"

I was crimson with shame and vexation, but I never thought of shielding myself by withholding the truth; so again I answered, "Yes, mamma."

"Who was the cake for, Margaret?"

"Susan had made it for Miriam."

"Was that why you suffered it to burn?"

"Yes, mamma." And now I hung my head in bitter shame; the littleness, the wretchedness, of my wicked jealousy became apparent the moment I saw mamma's pained look.

Mamma only said, "Margaret, I could not have believed that you would feel, that you would act, so unworthily. Come with me, and tell me why you are angry with Miriam."

I followed mamma into the study; papa was out, and we should not be interrupted. "Now tell me all about it, my poor child," she said in her own gentle tones, but so sadly that my naughty heart smote me to the core. And then I flung myself on the stool at mamma's feet, and, with my head on her lap, poured out a full confession, half-penitent, half-passionate, finishing up with—"I cannot help it, mamma! It is all Miriam now; no one thinks of me. They like her best at school; the girls make a fuss with her; Miss Everett and Miss Henrietta care for her, though she is always losing marks for lessons, and I am always perfect in them, and at the head of my class. Susan pets her; and you, mamma—yes, you and papa—are very, very fond of her."

"Margaret, has your father or have I myself shown you less tenderness or less consideration since Miriam came?"

I could not say that it was so.

Mamma resumed:—"We have not loved you at all the less since this poor, desolate child was committed to

our care. We do not love by space and measure, Margaret; I had no need to take from you to give to her. Had it been so, I should have felt that it was *not* my duty to keep her with me, my own daughter has the first right, and she will ever have it; but my daughter must try to conquer this very sinful and very groundless jealousy and envy, or she will make us all very miserable. And a jealous spirit unchecked and fostered now may grow to something frightful in after-days. My dear, pride is at the bottom of it all."

"May not some of it be that I love you and papa so much, and that all these years you have given me all the love you had to give?"

"I think not; because we have never neglected you for Miriam. Margaret, I have seen something of this spirit in you ever since you were a very little girl. You are scarcely a child now; it is time you examined your heart; it is time you began to regulate your own conduct. And oh, my dear, do pray for a meek and lowly spirit; be willing to take a lower place, if it be God's will; do not strive to be first; you do not know what misery will come of it, in future years, when your father and I are not here to protect you from yourself."

Then mamma prayed with me, and kissed me, and sent me into the open air, for I had cried so much that I was beginning to have a headache; and, altogether softened and ashamed of myself, I went out into the fields behind the house. The sunset was glorious, bathing all the sea and land in loveliest, richest hues; a purple glow was on the distant hills, and rosy clouds flecked all the deep blue sky, and were reflected on the quiet waves, while the great scarred cliffs were ruddy and bronzed, as it were, in the mellow evening light. I began to ascend the hill, that I might the better look across the bay and see the Chell Lighthouse gleaming like a silvery star on the distant promontory; and, as I wound round the lower path, I came upon the churchyard gate, for our parish church was half up the slope of Combe, and served the suburb of North Combe, and the more distant village of Upper Combe,

on the other side of the low green hill. I thought I would go and look at Mrs. Downing's grave, and ask God there to give me another heart, and take away my pride and the cruel jealous spirit that was in me.

But there, sitting on the scarcely green turf, was Miriam herself, her head bowed down in an abandonment of grief. The churchyard was very solitary and the evening still, and, as I advanced among the tombs, I heard her say, half in French and half in English, "Oh, mamma! mamma! Oh, dear God, do let me come to Thee! But if I may not come yet, oh! make me patient, make me fit to be with Thee in Thine own happy heaven." And again the childish voice broke off its prayer, and sobbed, "Oh, mamma! my own darling mamma!"

All my heart was melted then, and I stepped softly over the grass, and took the little one to my bosom, and kissed her fondly, and tried to comfort her. "Mirrie dear," I said, "your mamma is not here—she is there!" and I pointed to the azure dome, where already the first lamps of night were palely shining forth.

She ceased to weep, but clung to me convulsively; and presently she said, "I know that, Margaret; I know she is with Jesus, and He will take me to be with her some day, and with papa and little Charley, who went away so long ago. But it is hard waiting, and it may be many years; only, if it is right, I must try to be happy and to be good; but Margaret, Margaret, *do love me!*"

Smitten to the heart, I told her I did love her, and at that moment I really did; and then she nestled in my arms—I was so very much taller and stouter than she was—and whispered, "I wonder if mamma knows that you love me? If she does, she loves you too; and I know she loves uncle and aunt," meaning my father and mother; "and oh, Margaret! best of all, Jesus loves them for being so good to me, a poor child, with no one in the world. And I must try to be very good; and you will help me, will you not? I can't be clever, but I may be good; and oh, everybody is good to me!"

CHAPTER VIII.

THE NORTH FORT.

AND what about Gilbert all this time,—Gilbert, my ancient friend and staunch ally? I must go back a little, and tell you of the marvellous change that had come over the fortunes of the Tredgolds. The old gentleman—not so very old either, only at fourteen one thinks fifty a patriarchal age—had turned out to be exactly as my vivid fancy had painted him—rich, influential, a bachelor, and not remarkably good-tempered. But, amiable or unamiable, he took to Gilbert Tredgold, to whom he owed his life; and from the first hour they spent together in the best bedroom at the Royal Hotel, took a lively interest in his concerns, and seemed never tired of talking over all kinds of subjects with him.

The old gentleman, as I persisted in calling him—he had just entered on his forty-ninth year—was a Mr. Saunderson, a Southam merchant; and he had a very charming place of his own at Tenterly, half-a-dozen miles out of the great bustling sea-port where his business lay; and to this secluded spot he determined to carry Gilbert, as soon as they should both be sufficiently convalescent to undertake the journey; for Gilbert was by far the greater sufferer of the two. Mr. Saunderson seemed to be made of very tough and leathery materials, and had evidently a sort of gutta-percha constitution; since within twenty-four hours of the wreck he was quite comfortable, and delighted to go over the adventure again and again for the benefit of all who cared to listen to him; while Gilbert had to lie in bed, restless and feverish from his injured arm, which, for the time being at least, was altogether *hors de combat*. Indeed, the hurt took such troublesome ways, that at one time both my father and Mr. Warden were very apprehensive as to the result.

But, while Gilbert was medically attended and carefully

nursed, Mr. Saunderson was not idle: he ran down to Southam for a day or two, and when he returned he made all kinds of inquiries about his *protégé*, and, of course, learned the very humble circumstances of his family, though not their pretensions to the Tredgold-Austell estates. All that he learned pleased him greatly, and he went often to the cottage where Stephen Tredgold lived, and talked to him about the fishing trade and the loss of the "Little Gipsy." And the two held very serious and confidential conversations, and something more than ordinary was certainly mooted—something which gave Mr. Saunderson occasion to correspond with certain Government authorities, and even took him up to town—a journey not so easily accomplished then as now.

The result was presently shown to the intense satisfaction of all concerned, including the inmates of Kelver House, but rousing the envy of some people, who had "never cared for those Tredgolds, with their stuck-up ways, keeping themselves to themselves as if they were better than common folk." Mrs. Tredgold was quite right when, in her simple faith, she had said either they needed their boat no more, or something better was in store for them.

Mr. Saunderson had settled to take away Gilbert, but he knew right well that Gilbert was the mainstay of the family, and that, boy as he was, his services could not be dispensed with without severe loss and detriment to the humble fortunes of the Tredgolds.

Of course, the chief question with which he had to deal was some provision for the Tredgolds, Gilbert being permanently removed, and the "Little Gipsy" gone. It would have been easy enough for Mr. Saunderson to buy another and far more serviceable boat; for about his being "very rich," it seems I had guessed rightly. He could buy gallant vessels fit to circumnavigate the world if so it pleased him, and, of course, he could have become the owner of a whole fleet of fishing smacks had he chosen. Everybody expected that the "Little Gipsy" would be replaced by a far tighter trimmed craft; that Stephen Tredgold would glory in new

nets, and that all possible fishing appliances would be his—the best that could be purchased. But "everybody" was wrong; nothing of the kind occurred.

Between St. Eldred's and North Combe was a long, rocky promontory, jutting out far into the sea; the road to the town was cut round the inner base of the wooded hill which ended in this promontory, called North Point. Passing through the wood which skirted the high road, you came upon two little cultivated fields; then, upon a long, low line of building; then a smooth level of fine thymy turf; then terraces and earthworks, partly the design of nature, and partly the result of science also. And on the highest level were placed two guns, commanding all the bay, and protecting not only the small harbour of St. Eldred's, but the mouth of the river, which led to the more important haven further on. The long one-storied house was called the North Fort, and it had always been inhabited by some half-superannuated sailor or soldier, and was supposed to be connected with the coast-guard. As for the guns, there they were, supposing the French or other adverse powers should send a fleet into the Channel; but their chief present use was for effecting a *feu de joie* on the 18th of June, and on other National anniversaries. And, of course, there was a flagstaff and a flag; and it was the duty of the inmate of the Fort to hoist the Union Jack upon occasion, and also certain mysterious arrangements of bunting, which the vessels in the offing understood, and which signals were repeated at Chell Point and at other points beyond, as far as the great town of Southam. The duties of the North Fort man were very light; but still it was essential that he should be something of a seaman—no mere land-lubber could fill the post, or would ever be appointed. And when Mr. Saunderson came first to Kelver House to ask my father's counsel, and to tell us he thought he could secure the station for Stephen Tredgold, we all felt that this would be better than a dozen "Little Gipsies."

Some influence was needed even in the case of so very petty an appointment, and some canvassing was necessary;

but Mr. Saunderson never dreamed of being baulked; "baulking came," he used to say, "of entering rashly on your enterprises, and then doing things by halves." And so, after the writing of certain letters, and the arrival of certain long, blue, official-looking documents, and that sudden journey up to town, the desired end was achieved. The old sailor who had held the Fort so many years, who was nearly blind, and quite deaf, and very lame, and very surly in his moods, received *promotion!* To what I do not know, but I heard my father say that now old Pick would have nothing to do save smoke his pipe, and, when his temper served, tell long stories of the war-time, when he was a lad.

And accordingly Tredgold was appointed, *vice* Pick promoted; and the cottage on the beach was let to old Lobb's son, who had just taken to himself a bride, of so fishy an aspect, that I felt sure she must be an ugly kind of mermaid. And it was quite a grand occasion when Miriam and I went to the Fort to tea, and Bertha was wild with joy, for she was going to school, and Alice, her nimble fingers as busy as ever, sat in a real easy chair, her heart too full for words, but peace and joy shining out in her quiet countenance.

We were in the parlour—the most charming parlour, I thought, I had ever seen;—the furniture was new—Gilbert's parting present to his parents—and there was nothing remarkable in the chairs or tables, or in the strong Venetian carpet on the floor. But there was the dearest little weather-house on the chimney-piece, and several painted tin figures on stands—one of them designed to represent Black-eyed Susan, and another the British tar—her lover. Also a lady, dressed entirely in fans, with a fan for her petticoat, a fan for her bodice, fans for her sleeves, and a coquettish little fan by way of head-dress! Then there were queer shells, and one or two queerer stuffed creatures, which Gilbert had got from friendly sailors, and a wonderful looking-glass, in a curious gilt frame, with the picture of a ship on top, and garnished all about with the feathers of sea-birds. The ship

especially interested me. It was a blue ship on a stormy black and white sea, with an amber sky behind; and as I looked, I saw that some words were neatly written on the strip of wood which divided the picture from the actual mirror. I got up to see what was inscribed, and immediately I knew Gilbert's square and careful writing, and read, "Lo! *He* bringeth them unto their desired haven." And all at once I thought of the beautiful June evening when Gilbert and I had sat beside the creek and talked about the voyage of life, and how I had wished for a little breeze to fill my sails, and ruffle the calm of the small land-locked bay on which my tiny bark was floating—oh! so merrily. My wish had been accomplished—for breezes had rapidly sprung up, and I had never been in quite smooth waters since; and now there were clouds on my horizon—one cloud especially, that might any day suddenly darken all my sky, and send me forth on life's tempestuous ocean to breast the fury of the storm, and get into port as best I could. And where and what was the haven *I* desired?

"There's my old text, you see, Miss Margaret," said Gilbert, coming to the hearth-rug; "and I've written it under my name, on the first page of the beautiful new Reference Bible your papa has given me. I mean it to be a sort of motto to me through life."

"Do you, Gilbert? But does not the haven mean heaven? That is the end of the voyage of life, you know."

"I hope it will be the end of your voyage, and of mine, and of all we love and regard, Miss Margaret," said Gilbert, in a low voice. "But if one means to go to heaven, one must certainly steer for it. If one wants to go to Canton, one mustn't turn one's course for the West Indies. The first thing one has to do is to set out, you know."

"Well, yes, Gilbert! But we have set out; have we not? If life is a voyage, I should think it begins the very moment we are born!"

"So it does, Miss Margaret; and we get a good way on the voyage sometimes without as much as thinking whether we are at sea or not: but sooner or later something comes

to tell us where we are. The winds rise, as they rose that night, Miss Margaret, and the waves roar, and sun and stars are darkened, and then it is we know we are out on life's great ocean and bound for another country. There are two lands we may reach—only two! May we reach the right one—the desired haven!"

"Do you think you have set out for *that* country, Gilbert?"

"I think I have, Miss Margaret. By God's help I have set my face that way, and thither will I go. And so I hope and believe, having the Pilot on board, and chart and compass of His providing, I shall get safe into port some time or other."

"Gilbert, I should like to go that voyage—to the better country!"

"Then why not go, Miss Margaret? It's easier keeping in the right track, if you start upon it, and with your vessel taut and trim; but if you go wandering about a good many years, sailing for pleasure, or for unlawful commerce, the chances are, you will often come to grief, and you will be all but wrecked, and only get into harbour at last, with torn sails, and timbers strained, and bulwarks all stove in."

"But, Gilbert," I said, falling into his nautical phraseology, "do not vessels that are steering for *the* port sometimes come to grief? Are there no dreadful storms, no rocks ahead, no whirlpools for those who are bound for the haven?"

"Plenty, Miss Margaret; dreadful storms sometimes, and breakers too, and wrecks that are all but total; but that is most often through not taking good heed to the Pilot. Still, if we have really registered ourselves as the King's own vessel, really sworn ourselves to His service, we shall surely get through at the last, and glide calmly into harbour some pleasant spring evening; and so we shall be brought—not bring ourselves—to the 'desired haven.'"

"Why on a spring evening, Gilbert? what makes you say that?"

"I hardly know; except that the good old hymn says of that country—

"'*There* everlasting spring abides,
And never-withering flowers.'

And when one comes to the narrow sea that lies between us and that heavenly shore, I think one must see something of the land we are going to, Miss Margaret. I always think of that time as evening-time, calm and sunny, with fresh fragrant flowers springing all about. I have seen such glorious sunsets when I have been out in the "Little Gipsy," far out at sea; the clouds have looked like golden gateways, and the shining track upon the waves seemed like a pathway leading straight to heaven; and then I have thought, What must it be to come to the close of life's long day, and to lay down the oars and glide quietly into harbour, seeing before one's face the golden hills, and the towers of light, and the battlements of the Celestial City! And always that verse has come into my mind—'Lo, *He* bringeth them unto their desired haven.' And I determined when I bought that looking-glass there—and I bought it because of the ship that seems straining in a storm—that I would write underneath the words that first made me long to set sail for that blessed, happy haven. And really, in a sort of way, this Fort is a desired haven,—just for a little while, you know. It is so good to leave father and mother here, and to know that father need not go out again on windy nights, nor mother watch praying and weeping for his coming back. And perhaps Alice will get strong now she can be quite a lady, for I have made her promise that she will not work now, unless she feels quite able; and there's a chair for you!—fit for a princess when she is tired!"

Alice looked up and smiled. She, and I, and Gilbert had been for some time alone in the parlour; all the rest were gone out to inspect the guns, and that great mystery of the flags and flag-staff. Else had not Gilbert spoken so freely about the voyage and the haven; he never talked so except to Alice and myself. And Alice certainly was looking

better than usual; she was not quite so shadowy, and there was just the faintest tinge of colouring on her sunken cheek; the new *régime* was excellent for Alice. She was no longer compelled to work when rest was necessary; she had better food, and was taking a little wine, while the airy rooms of the old Fort were far more healthy than the small, close chambers of the tiny cottage close beside the rock, which kept out air and light, and for half the day the sunshine. I thought, as she sat on her low, cushioned chair, plying her bright needles, that she ought to have been a lady; there was such a quiet grace in all her movements, her voice was so sweet and so subdued, and there was mind as well as feeling in the quiet, pale face. But then, the Tredgolds were unlike any of the other boatmen and fishermen about St. Eldred's.

"And when do you go, Gilbert?" I asked presently, after we had watched the red light glow and fade away upon the famous Rudrhoe Cliffs.

"Next Tuesday, all being well."

"And what are you going to do at Southam?"

"In the first place to study; I am so far behind, that I really must do common school-boy work before I am fit for any of the naval schools. I can never thank you and the doctor enough, Miss Margaret; if it had not been for you, I should not have got my foot upon the ladder at all,—I should have had to begin at the very beginning."

"Not quite, Gilbert; we had nothing to do with teaching you to read or write, and there are many things about the clouds and the sea that you have taught me, so that I think our obligations are pretty nearly equal."

"It is very kind of you to say so, Miss Margaret; but it is very little I could teach you, except it were how to steer a boat, or to cast a net, and how to know the rank a vessel holds by her rigging. But I shall always feel what I owe to you; I shall not be ungrateful if I ever come to be a wealthy man, as Mr. Saunderson says I shall be, if I ever come to be Tredgold of Tredgold Court!"

Alice looked up quickly, and the faint blush upon her

cheek deepened to a rosy pink. "Do not build upon that, Gilbert," she said very earnestly.

"Why not, Alice?"

"I can hardly say why; only I think it may bring you much disappointment; and—I don't say it will, but it might lead you to loiter upon the way, and to call at places not marked upon your chart; and so you might come upon the breakers. You might make Tredgold Court your desired haven."

He thought a little, and then answered, "I see the danger, Alice, and I will try to avoid it. But you are a woman; and women do not see things always as men see them. There is no harm in my trying to get back—lawfully—what once was ours; is there, Miss Margaret?"

"No, indeed, Gilbert," I answered heartily; I was vexed with Alice for throwing cold water on her brother's bright ambitions; but then Alice's life had always been so pale and faded in its hues, it was natural that she should care little for any earthly good; yearning, as she must be, for the land where there is no more weariness nor pain. But I did not understand Alice Tredgold: she held the blessings of this life in honourable repute; and she accorded to them their just value; and she was patient with a patience of which I had no conception. Of all Christian graces, Alice, perhaps, practised patience most perfectly,—the patience that springs from a calm, unwavering faith; and of all heavenly virtues, patience was precisely the one I knew least about.

"One thing I have to ask, Miss Margaret," said Gilbert after a short silence—and he spoke hesitatingly and blushed scarlet—"might I take away, and keep for my very own, the Latin grammar you were so kind as to lend me a year agone?"

"Surely you may, Gilbert. A poor old tattered thing,—it is not worth your keeping now. Why, you will have plenty of new books, all you want and wish for, lexicons and everything!"

"I know it, Miss Margaret; but that dear old Latin

grammar will always be to me a treasure. I shall look at it often, and think of the hours beside the creek, when I sat poring over it, mending nets or sails, or waiting for the tide; and I shall think of you, and the day you made me understand about the third declension, and all the rest of it. I may have many a costly volume, perhaps, that I never could have hoped for had not all this turned up through the wreck; but never, never shall I have one that I care for like the old book you brought me when I had scarcely any others. And, Miss Margaret, I have taken the liberty of making you a little present,—not as payment for your goodness—oh, no, that could never be;—but just something for you to remember me by when I am far away. And, of all things, I thought you would like *this* the best."

Now "this" was a plain wooden inkstand, with two plain ink-glasses fitted into it, and a hollowed pen-tray; and it stood upon four round wooden feet. I looked for a minute, and then a sudden idea flashed in upon me, and I cried, "Oh, Gilbert! it is never—"

"Yes, it is, Miss Margaret. I went down to the rocks at low tide, and found several bits that I could tell were part of the poor 'Little Gipsy;' and I took the best pieces, and cut it out myself, and polished it, and I got Jem Byers to turn the legs, or knobs, for me, and I had these glasses fitted in. And if you will accept it, and use it always, Miss Margaret, I shall be the proudest fellow alive."

I need not say this was a very welcome gift to me; I valued it then as Gilbert's present, and the work of his own hands, and a memento of the poor little boat in which I had spent so many happy hours. The time came when I treasured it as a most precious relic, when no fingers but my own ever touched it, when it seemed to be all that remained to me of the happy days of my youth—the days when my little bark was gently rocking on the smooth, clear waters of a glassy bay, ere yet it was hurried out into the broad seas, and tossed upon the heaving waves of the great rush and struggle that is in the world.

CHAPTER IX.

THE CROSS AND THE CROWN.

And Gilbert went away to Southam, and our old haunts by the creek and along the shingly shore were deserted, for I never cared to go thither with Miriam; and she seemed to prefer inland rambles to walks upon the beach. And the days passed on quietly and uneventfully, the mellow autumn faded, and the chill blasts of winter came sweeping over the bay, and the waves looked cold and leaden, and the wind at night roared like thunder against the high, scarred cliffs.

I missed Gilbert very much, and should have felt his absence still more had I not found my time pretty thoroughly occupied. Though I only attended Miss Everitt's morning classes, I had always plenty of exercises to write, and lessons to prepare for the morrow; and I had begun to learn music, and took to it as naturally as a duckling takes to water. Also I prosecuted my Latin, and papa gave me an hour or two in the evenings as he could spare the time; and meanwhile I was really beginning to speak French intelligibly, which achievement was, of course, owing to little Mirrie's companionship.

Somehow my life seemed altogether changed, and I felt conscious of a certain change within myself. I was no more a child, caring only for the occupations of the hour, finding perfect happiness, as it were, in the mere enjoyment of being alive. I began to be ashamed of my hoydenish propensities, and, even had Gilbert remained at North Combe, I am not at all sure that the old alliance would have remained unaltered. Dimly, and by no means complacently, I was beginning to feel the restraints of growing womanhood,—to perceive that it was not in the fitness of things that I, Margaret Torrington, now in my fifteenth year, a gentlewoman born, should go flying about the shore, as Susan said, "like a great tomboy" (alas! my own conscience endorsed the uncomplimentary epithet); that un-

kempt locks, and faded, washed-out sun bonnet, and a tippet all awry, were *not* the costume for my father's daughter; that a knowledge of Latin and some acquaintance with the earlier books of Euclid could not atone for lamentable ignorance in all feminine lore and all feminine accomplishments; that an intimacy with all the flowers that grew, and all the shells that ocean whispered to, and all the strata that the solid earth comprised, were no compensation for lack of womanly intuition and womanly refinement. Perhaps my intercourse with other girls had taught me this; perhaps it was that childhood was passing away in the natural course of things, and maidenhood asserting itself with equally natural pertinacity: how it was, I know not, only I can distinctly remember that at this period I felt myself in a most uncomfortable transition state, and lamented my lost childhood on the one hand, while, on the other, I was pressing forward with eager step and impetuous throb of heart to the days that were to come,—the days that were to show me the plenitude of life itself,—the days when I should be a looker-on no more, but a real actor on the world's great stage,—the days when I should be really launched on the wide ocean itself, no longer riding quietly at anchor in the wind-defended harbour, but bound for the port,—though *what port* I could not really tell myself.

I suppose I was unconsciously realizing to myself Longfellow's stanzas—

> "Standing, with reluctant feet,
> Where the brook and river meet,
> Womanhood and childhood fleet.
>
> "Gazing with a timid glance
> On the brooklet's swift advance,
> On the river's broad expanse."

Yes; half timid and reluctant,—yet half impetuous and impatient; for it is grand to be a complete woman,—heart, and soul, and brain; but very sweet to be a child, innocent of the evil that is in the world, and content with simple joys and simple aspirations. Thank God, all ye whose child-

hood, robed even in the sweet glamour of the past, is a memory replete with blessedness.

Miriam and I "got on," as people say, very tolerably: certainly I ruled everywhere and at all times, and she was quite content to yield. I took the lead, and she, for the most part, meekly followed suit, seldom advancing opinions of her own, and very seldom proposing any change in the quiet routine of the day. But I never regarded her as an adequate companion: I looked upon her as an advanced baby, who might amuse me or be troublesome to me; but never as my equal,—never as the younger sister for whom I had wished so long. And yet, still I felt uneasily enough that there was something in Miriam beyond my comprehension,—a depth of purpose, and a wonderful self-repression, by no means in accordance with the estimate I entertained of her capacities. Even mamma said that there was a great deal in Miriam she did not understand,—a most rare union of childishness and maturity; "but," she added, "a sweeter, better-principled child I never met with; she really gives no trouble, and is always like quiet sunshine in the house."

This I could not contradict even to my own jealous heart; but I felt sick with discontent whenever it was said.

At last came Christmas, and we were released for a few weeks from our usual course of study; only I took advantage of the extra leisure to practise diligently, and Miriam was equally busy with her pencils and her little box of paints,—drawing being evidently her pleasure and her forte. Susan was busy with her puddings and the all-important mince pies, which Miriam, by the way, had only heard of, but never seen; while mamma, as was generally the case, found more than enough to do.

Early on Christmas-eve Miss Berners, our rector's daughter, came to ask us if we would assist her in the decoration of the church. We were, of course, delighted to do anything of the kind, and mamma, after some little demur on account of chills and damps, consented, and we went away to enter on our novel work. Clara Berners was

quite grown up, and a very tall and handsome young woman she was, and a great favourite with all the people at North Combe. I liked her very much; in fact, I entertained for her that species of rapturous admiration which young girls at the age I then was often lavish on those of their own sex who are a few years their senior. I do not suppose that Miss Berners was more than twenty years of age; but at fourteen, six years seems to be an immense period in advance, and I was quite ready to acknowledge her claims to supremacy, especially here in the church, which, by virtue of her being her father's daughter, seemed to be her natural sphere of sway and action. In those days Christmas decorations were not nearly so elaborate as now: a few bushes of holly and yew stuck in the chandeliers, perhaps a wreath of laurel at the back of the reading-desk, and another round the face of the clock in the front of the organ-gallery, was all that was attempted, and all that people expected to see, when they came, according to custom, to join in

"Hark! the herald angels sing."

But this year Clara Berners was bent upon producing an effect. She had certain vague conceptions in her own mind of what might be done, though she had no fixed scheme to work upon; and she had been already several hours that morning in the empty church, trying to invent something that should astonish all the population of North Combe, but unable to carry out any of the designs which were floating through her brain.

"Now, Margaret," she said, when we had reached the top of the middle aisle, "do try and help me; I want something better than the bushes of evergreens we have hitherto gloried in. Really last year papa looked just like 'Jack-in-the-Green,' and I could not see across the church for the little forest that old Jonathan hung about the rails of our pew and the churchwarden's pew. What shall we begin with?"

I looked about, and saw holly, and yew, and laurustinus

in profusion; also box and laurel: and I saw, also, that the capacities of the church were good, and a strong desire to distinguish myself sprang up in my breast; but how to set about it!

"I have made all these wreaths," said Clara, pointing to a heap of leaves and branches strung together; "but I don't know how to fix them: I have hung them in festoons, and they remind one too much of a ball-room, and I have hung them nearly straight, and then they look stiff and stupid; yet, what can one do but make lines, and loops, and wreaths? I was nearly out of all patience, so I made up my mind to come to you; somehow I fancied you had taste, and could help me."

Of course I felt flattered, and now it behoved me to prove to my partial friend that I really was a person of unquestionable taste and ingenuity. I saw with her that what had been begun was not exactly suitable; but how to devise something new, and picturesque, and, at the same time, not inconsistent, was the difficulty I had to encounter, or confess myself a failure. I thought a moment, and then I said, "What if we wreathed the *pillars* as high as we could reach? and we could get somebody in with a ladder to fasten the topmost part. You know the picture of the pillars in Rosslyn Chapel; let us do something of that kind."

"That will do delightfully, and I told Tom Mills to come in presently with a ladder and large nails for the rough work. Let us begin directly; here is twine, and here are scissors and a good pocket-knife; but take care of your fingers, or the doctor will be down upon me for setting you to so dangerous a task. And what will you do, little one?"

The last words were, of course, addressed to Miriam, who stood quietly by my side. Miss Berners spoke patronisingly to her as a child and a nobody, while she addressed me as her equal, and this pleased me; for, again, I was longing to be first,—first at home, first at school, first in the village,—especially first whenever and wherever Mirrie Downing was concerned. Miriam modestly replied she would do anything we liked.

"Well then," said Clara, good-humouredly, "suppose you make up some little wreaths for the back of the pulpit; we will arrange them in some fashion or other: let us see if your little fingers have any cleverness in them; only make the garlands firmly. Kate Tremayne helped me last year, and all her work came to pieces directly we began to adjust it."

"I think," said Mirrie, speaking slowly, and colouring, "that I could make something like the things I have seen in France; they were very pretty, and I have helped make them for the *fêtes*."

"Ah! but, little one, we can't have Popish things here. I must say Popery has the advantage over us in the way of pretty, tasteful devices, and striking decorations; but still, you know, it would never do to adopt any of their megrims. But let us see your French things." And she nodded condescendingly, saying to me as we passed to the bottom of the aisle in order to commence with the first pillar, "It will keep the child quiet. I scarcely know why we brought her; only it seemed unkind to leave her out, for I always count Christmas-eve as a sort of gala-day of my own, spent here in doing work I like. Only hitherto I have had inefficient coadjutors—old Jonathan and Kate Tremayne. I scarcely know which was the worse." I looked back, and saw Mirrie sitting on the pulpit-stairs earnestly sorting her evergreens; but presently she came to ask if she might run home for several things she wanted. Permission being granted, she set off, running quite gleefully, Miss Berners calling after her, "Remember, no crucifixes, little one!"

Mirrie looked amazed, but went on, and Miss Berners said carelessly as we resumed our work, "What lovely eyes that child has, Margaret! What is the matter with them?"

"I do not understand you quite."

"Well, then, what makes them unlike all other eyes? Other people have blue eyes—violet eyes, rather, just the same exquisite colour, and the same shape; but I suppose it is they have not the same soul looking out of them. She looked like one of Guido's angels just now when she was speaking to us. I shall make a pet of that little Mirrie; one

might do anything with her except make her do wrong or say an insincere thing."

"How do you know that?" I asked, rather satirically. I was horribly annoyed, for here was another worshipper at Mirrie's shrine where I least expected it.

"I know it by her face," said Clara, thoughtfully. "I never really looked into it before. She is very truthful and innocent, and perfectly docile, and she is a tender-hearted little thing, and would not vex any one for the world; moreover, she is humble to a fault, I should say." And she looked, as I thought, significantly at me, while I kept my tongue still and my face bent over the holly-sprays I was busily intertwining with the yew; but the pleasure of the day and the day's work, into which I had entered, with all my native eagerness and ardour, was all over. I wished myself away from the quiet dreamy church; its tall arches and ancient walls, and, above all, the deep-browed, solemn chancel, seemed to reprove my wickedness. I was in a place dedicated to the worship of God, to praise, and prayer, and the proclamation of His Word, and I felt conscious that, while maintaining an outward show of reverence, I was cherishing in my heart thoughts altogether in dissonance with the sanctuary; and I longed to jump up and leave Clara and Miriam to do the work alone. And then I pitied myself as I reflected that, had Miriam never come to Kelver House, I should not have had her for a rival either on the present occasion or on any other. And all the while I felt sure my companion was watching me keenly, and I knew her to be a quick discriminator, and apt at reading countenances, and remarkably outspoken in her way of communicating her impressions. I almost expected to hear her blurt out something about my being a wicked, envious girl, and about my conduct being very mean and despicable. But Clara Berners worked on and said nothing, and I took courage again. Truly conscience makes cowards of us all!

Mirrie soon returned, and went quietly to her seat, and we heard nothing of her, except when Mrs. Berners sent us in a charming little luncheon, and she was summoned into

the vestry to partake of it. And then Clara and I succeeded so well in our wreaths, and were so engrossed at one end of the church, that we quite forgot our little companion; and we had finished all the pillars, and the front of the organ-gallery, before we began to think it might be as well to go and see what garlands or devices were prepared ready to our hands; for the short winter day was rapidly waning to its close, and already the darker parts of the church were dim with shadow. But just then some one called us into the porch, and then old Jonathan hobbled up to know if we should want candles; and we stayed some time looking at the sun going down so grandly just beyond Rudrhoe Point.

When we went back again, some last rays were yet flickering through the lofty windows, and the light fell full on Mirrie's handiwork. She had wrought the rich green holly-leaves and the glowing scarlet berries into the letters I H S, contained in a beautiful monogram; and Clara was in ecstacies, and told her she was a little queen, and there would be nothing like it within fifty miles of Combe, and the rector would be in raptures! Miriam coloured brightly, but looked pleased; and then she showed us how she had decorated the chancel. She had simply wreathed the antique chairs and rails with ivy; behind the communion-table was the monogram repeated, and in front, on the dark ruby-coloured cloth, was a plain cross, underneath a crown.

"It is beautiful, Mirrie," said Clara, presently. "I could not have done it half so well! Margaret and I had not a notion of the kind. And I am sure papa cannot object to anything. But some people might say the cross was Romish."

"I think it is not right," I said, very decidedly.

Mirrie looked imploringly; and Clara answered, "I do not see why it should be wrong, Margaret: the cross is the common symbol of our salvation; it reminds us of the faith we hold: and the festival we commemorate to-morrow morning has much to do with it. Good Friday comes after Christmas-day,—it all ends with the Cross."

"Not quite; does it?" interposed Miriam very gently.

"No, not quite," said Clara, smiling; "but what were you thinking of, little one?"

"I was thinking of the Resurrection, and then of the Ascension. It was mamma who told me all about it. She told me very often, and I could understand her quite. I was thinking how she spoke of the cross being borne before the crown was won; how we, all of us, have some cross that we should try to bear patiently, and even gladly, for Jesus' sake, feeling it a great honour to be partakers of the cross which Christ Himself had to endure before the crown was His. And it was thinking of the text that says, 'Who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is set down at the right hand of God,' that made me think of making the cross and the crown together."

Clara stooped down to kiss the little girl, and I could see that tears were in her eyes, and she said softly, "Crosses are hard to bear, though, are they not, little Mirrie?"

A weary look crossed the child's face as she answered, "Yes; but Jesus will help us if we ask Him; and mamma used to say that if we took up the cross willingly when it came before us, it was not half so heavy; and that the more we fretted and murmured under the weight, the heavier it would be."

"Ah! and sometimes we make our own crosses," said Clara, thoughtfully. But this Miriam did not clearly understand;—she might have understood though, with a living instance moving always by her side. And, at the same time, it smote upon my conscience that I had some share in making Miriam's crosses as well as my own! Indeed, people who are ingenious in making crosses for themselves are generally very apt and industrious in the manufacture of crosses, which all around them are compelled to bear.

Ah, Mirrie, Mirrie, I would give worlds now, if I had them, to undo the past. There are some things which God indeed has forgiven, but for which we can never forgive ourselves; some things that leave so bitter a taste behind them, that ever and anon, despite all the sweetness of the

promises and all the joy of faith and hope, we go softly, saying to ourselves, "Unclean, unclean!" Thanks be to God, who, through all, and over all, giveth us the victory, through our Lord Jesus Christ. In that all-atoning sacrifice, which Calvary saw long centuries ago, the believer's sins were for ever washed away, his guilt all cancelled, and his pardon sealed; but, till the flesh and spirit part, and we wake up in *His* likeness, must the memory of some past sins be inexpressibly mournful. They will never impugn us in the other and better life—how can they when we see our risen Saviour, our Ransom, "face to face"?—but the consequences of some past transgressions go with us to the very brink of Jordan's stream. And there, we and they *must* part company for evermore. Thanks be unto God for His unspeakable gift.

CHAPTER X.

CHRISTMAS-DAY.

CHRISTMAS-EVE had been warm and moist, but after sunset the wind changed, and it began to freeze; so that Christmas morning rose clear and bright—a slight powdering of snow on the distant hills, and every hedge and tree about North Combe beautifully frosted, every branch and spray sparkling in the glad sunlight, as if it had been by a fairy's wand transmuted into silver, set with pearls and brilliants.

I rose in high good humour. Something of the true Christmas spirit had entered into my heart on the evening previous, when my dear father prayed, surrounded by his little household, that our hearts might overflow with thankfulness and love—thankfulness for the great joy that came to all mankind at the first happy Christmas-tide, and love to all the world, especially to such as were associated with us in kindred or household bonds—the spirit of Him who came to bring to earth peace and goodwill to men. And as I listened, not joining, alas! save in form, and knowing, too,

that I was the only one whose heart went not with the prayer, I felt ashamed of my own littleness; I regarded my envious thoughts as mean and contemptible; and all the beauty of love unfeigned stood disclosed before me as my dear father spoke. No, not all; only somewhat of its fair proportions rose before my worldly vision; for only the Christian can fully appreciate love; the worldling knows it not, even as he knows not faith, and peace, and other lovely graces; only dimly and very imperfectly can he who is not united to the Source of all love apprehend in all its breadth and purity that fairest grace of charity.

I rose from my knees determined to wrestle to the death with my adversary, to put away with a strong hand all evil thoughts, all unkindnesses, and petty strifes, and jealousies; I resolved to grow up into a noble, benevolent-minded woman—a woman whom all should love and confide in, all reverence and admire. Even in the very moment of purposed reformation, the poison, you see, was thus working. If I could only be first in all places, and at all times,—undeniably, prominently first,—and Mirrie *second*, why, then, no doubt, I could be as amiable as possible, and patronise Mirrie with a right good will.

It was in something of this spirit that I awoke on that pleasant Christmas morning, persuading myself that I really was in charity with all the world, and with Miriam Downing in particular.

At the same time, as I dressed, I wondered why Mr. King had not made his appearance and taken his own niece away to spend her Christmas with him. "A pretty Uncle Cuthbert, truly, not to trouble himself about his own flesh and blood! And he must know all about the wreck of the "Hirondelle," and the death of his sister, Mrs. Downing; for all the papers in the kingdom had told something of the melancholy story."

Still, I was, or I fancied I was, glad that Mirrie should share with me the simple Christmas festival of Kelver House; also, that she should have a Christmas present as well as myself; and in high good humour with myself I

went downstairs into the parlour, and there were the two parcels on the table, addressed to Miss Torrington and Miss Downing. Mine was a copy of Milton's "Paradise Lost," for which I had longed for some time. Miriam's was, I soon found out, a beautiful new box of water-colours. Certainly, her *cadeau* cost more than mine! But I stifled the rising discontent, and heroically met Mirrie as if nothing were the matter, and kissed her, and wished her "a happy Christmas!"

She kissed me back again so gratefully, that I felt like a little Judas in petticoats; and I had always prided myself not a little on my perfect sincerity; indeed, I had often apologised for sundry unkind and objectionable speeches by saying that I could never pretend anything, and that I must say what I felt, &c., &c.,—the hackneyed excuse of all people who make themselves nuisances by feeling it their duty to be distressingly candid,—people who worship at the shrine of what *they* call Truth, though all the while the goddess is really *Temper:* and *she* can robe herself in any dress and in any attributes wherewith her votaries would wish to clothe her. And the sacrifice laid upon her altars is generally other people's feelings, and other people's cherished prejudices, always offered at the expense of much Christian courtesy and Christian charity.

I tried to bury myself in the pages of Milton, while Miriam went into ecstacies over her paint-box with its rows of softly-tinted colours, its pretty little palette, and its pencils and camel-hair brushes. It was a pretty sight, the blue eyes swimming with happy tears, the delicate cheeks glowing like summer roses, and the golden ringlets falling like a veil round the snowy neck and shoulders. I could appreciate beauty, and I thought Mirrie looked that morning her very loveliest: while I—I had brown skin, and tangly hair, and large hands, and was all angles and irregularities; I was always being told that one shoulder was higher than the other, and admonished to keep my chin in; moreover, I grew so rapidly that I could not fail to look awkward and uncomfortable, and to feel uncomfortable too,—especially

when Susan saluted me with—"Deary me, Miss Margaret, what a gawky you do look, growing at such an awful rate, and running all the flesh off your bones, and your frock up to your knees, and all muddied and torn, and your hair all blowsed about, and your face the colour of old Lobbs's when he's bin at sea a fortnight!" Mine in those days was one of those unfortunate skins that freckled, and tanned, and blistered, and roughed universally, and showed any trace of dirt or crying marvellously;—whereas Mirrie, though a famous blusher, was always delicately fair; a little glow certainly improved her, and I really believe that if she had renounced the use of soap and clean water for a week she would scarcely have looked dirty. And I was often charged with neglect of toilet duties when they had been most carefully performed.

But I had never cared about my looks before Mirrie came. No; I had been always happy and contented, and, as I assured myself, *nearly* always good. Now, alas! I knew that I was very seldom good, but, on the contrary, nearly always naughty. Oh, if Mr. King would only come and take her away, as he ought to do! Then I should be as I had been in those simple, happy days gone by. Then I should be a good girl again, a happy girl, a religious girl. I saw my father looking at me very anxiously as, bending over my book, I pretended not to hear any of Mirrie's rapturous comments; utterly free from any jealous and envious tendencies of his own, he never suspected them in others till they were most visibly revealed. But now he began to be aware of the root of bitterness springing up within my heart, and, indeed, mamma had spoken with him about the spirit I was evidently cherishing.

I saw that he was grieved, but he did not say a word except to desire us to put our presents aside and take our breakfasts. But presently he began to talk about the true joy of Christmas, of its being a time of peace, and love, and grateful song, a time when feuds were healed, and injuries forgiven, and differences overlooked, a time when all the world should glorify the Prince of Peace not with

lips only, but in life. There were many poor families, I knew, who would sit down to dinner that day and bless the doctor for his liberality, many who would thank him for something more than advice and medicine gratis, and some who would not forget his services as peacemaker, some who would associate him ever with the pleasures of the family gathering. There were rich and poor who owed something that day to my father's open hand, and loving heart, and simple wisdom.

And as I listened again I felt self-condemned and willing to clasp hands with everybody, Mirrie especially; so that, when we rose from the breakfast-table, I was all smiles and merry chat, and I saw Miriam's countenance lighten as her gaze met mine inquiringly, as it often did, poor child! when she wondered what my mood might be. I was even generous enough to admire her colour-box, and to promise her a piece of fine green cloth I had by me to make a proper cover for it.

Then we dressed and set off to church, the sunshine sparkling on the bay, and all the common pathways looking as if they had been strewn with glittering gems. And the church looked beautiful,—everybody said so; and everybody admired the monogram and the crown and cross upon the table-cloth. The wreathing of the pillars, too, had its meed of praise, and I tried hard not to be vexed at the preponderance, as I imagined, of approbation lavished on those decorations in which I had had no hand. And, but for Clara Berners, no one would have known that the fairest portion of our work was due to one alone; for Mirrie said nothing, though her rising colour told that she was pleased and gently excited.

And once more I listened to the Christmas hymn, sitting in my own place between my father and my mother,—once more I joined, outwardly, at least, in the beautiful service for the day. I mingled my voice with chant and song; and I listened all entranced to the Pastoral Symphony which was played by way of voluntary. And then, the Blessing of Peace being ended, I rose up with many others, while a few

remained to keep the Feast,—the true feast of the holy Christmas-tide. But when we came into the porch, Miriam said falteringly, "Margaret, *would* you wait a little for me just beyond the Lych-gate?"

I assented and walked on. I knew where she was going; for I saw that she had carried to church on her arm, under her cloak, a little coronal of ivy, and burnished holly-leaves, and coral-berries. I knew that she was going to the grave that covered the precious dust of her I had seen in the last calm sleep of death. The orphan was going home, keeping her Christmas-tide in spirit in the shadow of the tomb.

I waited and waited, till on any other occasion I should have been impatient; but at last, when I thought those who had remained in the church would be ready to come forth, Mirrie reappeared, and, begging my pardon for keeping me so long in the cold, walked quietly home.

One or two friends joined us at dinner-time, and we had a happy afternoon, and a pleasant, musical evening; a very pleasant evening, and my heart was light as a feather. I forgot all my discontent, and all my jealousies, and felt for the time that I really loved Miriam Downing. And when, late at night, I kissed my father, I said, folded in his close embrace, "Oh, papa! I never enjoyed a Christmas-day so much. But I tell you what we will do next Christmas-day—"

"Hush!" he said, quietly. "We must not boast ourselves of to-morrow; much less of this time next year. Margaret, my darling, we *may* never meet again as we have met to-day!"

A spasm of the old pain which had tortured me six months before shot through my heart, and again I felt I was white to the very lips, and a mist was before my eyes; but papa did not notice it, for he was looking straight before him, and my face was hidden on his shoulder. He went on: "We never know, dearest, how soon the sweetest ties on earth may be broken up:—not broken, perhaps, but loosed; and it does not so greatly matter if we are, as we heard this morning, not only of one household on earth, but

of the holy and never-divided household of faith. My Margaret, I would give my life to know that you were one with us in those blessed, indissoluble ties."

I hid my face there, sobbing. I knew I was not of the household, not a true member of the Holy Catholic Church, not one with the Saviour I professed to serve,—consequently, not one in dearest, holiest ties with those most precious, most beloved. Papa, mamma, Susan—all were bound for the everlasting kingdom.

I only was tossing—ah! I knew it now—on the wild waves of this world's troublous sea; scarcely yet beyond the channel, but driving—driving onwards to the great unfathomable ocean, where so many a goodly bark has made shipwreck for want of helm and chart, and the Pilot on board.

When Christmas-day came again I might be a solitary mourner;—who could tell? And for a moment I realized the full power and pathos of those words—

> "It is
> A fearful thing to love what death may touch;
> A fearful thing that love and death may dwell
> In the same world."

Ay! and it is indeed "a fearful thing" when the love of earth is not mingled with the love of heaven; when we can go with our best beloveds to the river's brink, but no farther,—oh, no farther! when the grave ends all, when the darkness is such as may be felt, when we hide our stricken heads, nor watch the waning of the night, nor wait for the dawn of the resurrection morning; when we gaze on folded hands, and silent lips, and cold pale brow, and bid them *farewell*, hopelessly! Can there be a sadder lot, a deeper grief, a more miserable void?

I went to sleep thinking of this, and woke up sobbing—as I fancied, in the churchyard on the hill, beside an open grave, that was just going to be covered in; and glad to find myself in my own room, with the moonlight streaming in, and the murmur of the rising and falling waves beneath

the window. But I felt so scared that I got out of bed, and looked out on the sea and the lighthouse far across the bay, and then I wandered into Mirrie's room, that opened from mine, though we very rarely trespassed on each other's domains. I could see her sweet face as she lay in placid slumber, and she looked so like her mother, as I had seen her first and last, that I shuddered; for everything around me seemed to bring to my mind previsions or memories of death. Not wishing to awake the child, and feeling no consolation in surveying the pale, quiet figure on the bed, I stole back to my own chamber, and, lying down again, tried to lose myself once more in sleep, and I repeated monotonously sundry hymns and poems in the hope of lulling myself into forgetfulness. But it was long before I found what I sought, and I had gone over nearly all my stock before drowsiness surprised me, and then I sank into a sound slumber, and did not wake till Susan came to tell me that breakfast was ready, and to admonish me by reciting with peculiar emphasis some of Dr. Watts's lines on the subject of the sluggard. I laughed at her, and hurried my toilet, which was never very elaborate, telling my ruffled curls that they should have a regular tilt with the brush and comb—*presently*. And—but I need not specify: any untidy young lady who has risen late on a cold winter's morning, and rushed downstairs, postponing certain duties to a more convenient season, will know precisely the kind of toilet I made on that occasion.

Entering the breakfast-room, and expecting to find the meal half over, I was startled to see some one—a gentleman—sitting at the table, intent on frizzled ham. His back was towards the door by which I entered, and I felt quite inclined to rush back again and remedy certain deficiencies in my appearance, of which I was all at once painfully conscious. But papa saw me, and cried, "Oh, Margaret, Margaret, late again! and here is an old friend come to see you betimes."

Thus accosted, I could not retreat, but moved onward unwillingly enough, and then the gentleman turned round

and rose to meet me, and lo! it was Gilbert Tredgold! But not the Gilbert who used to sit patching sails, and mending nets, and picking up stray bits of knowledge by the creek,—and yet the very Gilbert of those old, lamented, fairy days; for there was the same bright face, the same honest eyes,—so brave and yet so tender,—and the square, firm chin that had always made me think of a fixed, stedfast purpose, and an indomitable will. But the dress, the air, and the accent were altogether changed. Three months of the gentle life had wrought a wondrous change in mere externals. I wondered if he were as altered in heart and character as in tone and aspect.

He had come to North Combe late on Christmas-eve, and Christmas-day he had given sacredly, he said, to the old folk at home. He had promised Mr. Saunderson to return on the 26th; therefore, he came so early to snatch an hour with his "best friends;" for he must be in St. Eldred's by twelve to catch the Southam coach.

And what was he doing? we all wanted to know. "Oh, all sorts of things!"—living in a grand house for one thing, dining solemnly at six o'clock with Mr. Saunderson, waited upon by a pompous butler and two tall pompous footmen; keeping his own hack and dogs, and, what was much more satisfactory, his own tutor,—a pale-faced, meek young clergyman in delicate health, who knew everything there was to know, and wrote verses both English and Latin, and was evidently glad to recruit himself under Mr. Saunderson's hospitable roof, and to go over such familiar ground with so earnest and tractable a pupil; also, to tell him of his love affairs, which Gilbert said were as romantic as a story, but in most unflourishing condition. Altogether, Gilbert seemed very happy, and we had a pleasant talk over old times, and present times, and times that were to come.

He and I were left alone for a few minutes. I had been playing some of my tunes to him, and when I had finished and come back to the fireside, he said, "Miss Margaret, may I ask, have you set out for the Haven yet?"

And I answered—"No, Gilbert; I am going quite the

other way: I am farther off the track than when you were here. Don't ask me why,—I cannot tell you; but I am."

"I am so sorry," he replied, and his fine face was clouded with real, keen regret,—"I did hope—; but, oh, Miss Margaret, do not be content to go the wrong way! That little Mirrie is bound for the Haven, I am sure. What a lovely child it is! I never saw such a pure, sweet face! and such a perfect little lady! It must be very pleasant for you to have her here; you always wished you had a younger sister to pet, and teach, and ramble with."

I said nothing, but my heart throbbed with pain. Yes, even *he*, who had been all my own, brother, servant, and subject; he was going over too! He must sing her praises! And when he was gone I ran out into the garden, and, looking across to the waves dashing high against the fatal Serrars, I said passionately, "Oh, Miriam Downing! it was an ill wind indeed that drove you on these shores! Why did the waves bring you here? It were better for us both that you were lying with your mother yonder!" And then I paused and trembled, horrified at my own thoughts. Truly I was getting farther and farther from the Haven.

CHAPTER XI.

FALLEN ASLEEP.

I MUST hasten over these childish days, or I shall never get to the end of my story, since all the stirring incidents of my life have yet to be narrated: that which I have told you so far being, as it were, a sort of preamble, which could not be omitted, seeing that it gives the key to much which might else have been inexplicable, and yet was only, so to speak, the preface to the real life of action and suffering yet to come.

And yet I linger here. Unworthy as I was of the calm, sweet happiness of my home, of the blessing of parents whose only fault was too much leniency where my own

errors and shortcomings were concerned, I turn lovingly to the contemplation of those last months of peaceful sunshine; that is to say, the real sunshine was about me and around, but many a heavy cloud obscured its tranquil brightness—in nearly every case, clouds arising from my own miserable moods and wicked jealousy.

For my dislike to Miriam Downing increased mightily, as it was sure to do, not being nipped in the very bud. As the weed that a twelve-months' child might pluck up with his little fingers, will, if suffered to remain, require ere long a strong man's grasp and the action of the spade for its eradication, so unholy tempers not battled with at once, will take deep and deeper root till it becomes a life-struggle to keep the evil down. Bad mental habits are even more harmful than bad personal habits; and we all know how hard the latter are to conquer. My father was pained at my conduct, and more than once he spoke to me seriously, and even severely on the subject; and I was humbled, and despised myself; and sometimes I resolved I *would* burst asunder the dreadful chains of envy and prejudice, and be free once more, as I had been, I told myself over and over again, before Mirrie Downing came. But it always ended in my returning to my own bad self; and I hated Mirrie all the more, because she made me miserable—as if it were any fault of hers—poor, innocent child!—but chiefly because on her account papa had spoken to me as he had never, never before spoken. I knew I deserved it; I knew I merited his grave speech and sad reproach; I felt even that it was his duty so to speak: but still I laid it all on Mirrie, who had made me the contemptible creature I had now become.

I said as much one day to Susan when she had been remonstrating with me for speaking haughtily and sharply to the little girl, and her reply was, "Miss Margaret, it was just in you all the time. Seeds lie dead-like in the ground, they tell me, a long time, if the soil and air don't suit 'em; but give 'em what they want, or, rather, what their nature wants, and they'll spring up fast enough—ay, and flourish,

too! It's no credit to keep our temper when it's never tried: bless me! should you praise a man for being sober who never got drunk just because there was nothing but water and milk for him to drink? You were the only one, Miss Margaret—you were first—and last too, for the matter of that—and you are first in many ways now, as is your due, seeing you are the eldest and the biggest, and Miss Torrington into the bargain; but you want not only to be at the top of the tree, but at the top of every bulrush and every little scrumpy bush that grows—it's your envious disposition: and if you don't ask the Lord to cure you, and *let Him cure you, too*—for it's no use saying prayers and doing nought to get 'em answered—you'll be the miserablest woman that ever lived, and you'll cause misery, too—such misery as you may weep bitter tears for when I am in the grave. Now, remember what I say about the prayers, for it's true."

I thought of what Gilbert had said to me months before on that evening when he first told me his ambition concerning Tredgold-Austell—that evening which, on looking back, seemed to me the last evening of my old, happy, careless life. The next morning papa had spoken to me about his health, and a week afterwards came the shipwreck and its consequences—Gilbert went away and Miriam came. And if one's life is, as some say, a drama, certainly the first act of mine ended when I lay down on my pillow that calm midsummer night. The second act was already in progress. How would it develop itself?

I turned to Susan and said, "I do not believe it is of any use to pray; I do just the same things, and I can't help it."

"There are several ways of praying, Miss Margaret; and only one is the right way. I misdoubt me you go wrong. It's not praying at all, unless you are downright in earnest; and as I said before, you must pray—and *strive!* Deary me! suppose I sat down and prayed to the Lord that the dinner might be cooked nicely and in time, and then kept sitting down and let the fire go out, and never washed

the vegetables nor put 'em on. That sounds silly enough, I dare say; but it's what you do when you ask the Lord to help you, and then never try to help yourself. And there is a difference between praying that no temptation may arise, and praying to be kept in the hour of temptation. Why, when I lost that letter of the master's, that I knew had money in it, didn't I sit down on the first doorstep I could find and pray to the Lord to let me find it again. But when I had prayed I didn't stop sitting there, waiting for man or angel to come and put it in my hand: I got up and sought for it carefully, and I found it, because the Lord blessed the seeking."

The long winter passed away, the high spring-tides of March rolled up to our very garden-gate, soft airs began to flutter the sails upon the bay, and nothing of any note occurred. I worked hard at my studies, particularly at my music, and won the plaudits of my governesses and masters, but I did not win their love. And Mirrie improved and rose in her class; but I felt sure she would never be a clever woman, while I—I felt as if I could learn all that any one could teach me; there was no lore so deep that I did not hope some day to grapple with it, no science so high that I did not aspire to in the future; and as for my pianoforte, I loved it like a living creature, and I knew that my voice was like a bird's, and I sang almost as easily as the feathered choristers in the woodlands. April passed, with its tender green, its golden sunshine, and its sweeps of rain. May, with its blossoms and long light evenings, came and went, and June arrived once more with her coronal of leaves and flowers, and it was midsummer again, and I was nearly fifteen years of age.

And now the shadow that had darkened all my sky twelve months before fell on me again, and not on me alone, but on every inhabitant of Kelver House. Papa became so unwell that he was quite unable to take his rounds: without any positive malady he grew so weak that the walk to church and back again ceased to be within the bounds of possibility, and soon he lay on the sofa the greater part of the day.

Some of his medical brethren in the neighbourhood, and one old friend from Deddington, came to see him, and they all told him "he must *rest*—rest was all he wanted! and light, nourishing diet; medicine was not needed."

"He knew that," he said; and I thought, since he did not require medicine, there could not be much the matter; and yet—and yet my heart misgave me when I looked at his face—it was so altered since the early spring; it was very pallid and aged to a remarkable degree, and his figure was bent, and his fingers thin and tremulous. I scarcely ever had a Latin lesson now.

Let me recall one or two scenes from that long, faded past—one or two periods that come vividly out from all the rest, as I think of that last summer at St. Eldred's.

It was Saturday evening, and I was alone with papa; mamma and Mirrie were both out, and Susan was busy in the kitchen. I had been giving papa some jelly, and now he was sitting up by the window, watching—or so I thought—the golden netting which was playing on the sea.

"Papa, you are better to-night," I said.

"Am I?" and he smiled, and patted my shoulder. "Well, I am not quite so tired as usual."

"No, indeed; and you are looking more yourself, papa."

Again he smiled, and stroked my curls, and I added, "You only want rest, papa. Dr. James and Mr. Derwent both said so: the weather has been so fearfully hot. If it gets cooler, and you have perfect rest, it will be all right soon."

"Yes, all right soon," he answered dreamily, still looking at the golden-rippled sea. "Yes, I need rest, Margaret."

I was glad to hear him say so much, and yet I was not satisfied; I did not like that far-seeing look across the sparkling waters. And what did that glance, half-beaming, half-sorrowful express? Presently I said, "Papa, of what are you thinking?"

"Of Saturday night, my child," was the answer.

"What about it, papa? Is it any particular Saturday night?"

"Not that I know of, my dear. I was thinking more especially of life's Saturday night?"

I understood him, and my heart grew faint within me, and I murmured as a sort of appeal, "*Papa!*"

"Yes; the Saturday night when one's week of toil is over, when one looks back on work finished or unfinished, and gives thanks to God for the strength granted for each day gone by; when one knows that labour never more may be resumed, and that the calm night-shadows are gathering round, and one may close one's eyes, and fold one's hands, and say, 'I will both lay me down in peace, and sleep, for Thou, Lord, makest me dwell in safety;'—the sleep, my dear, that will know no waking till the resurrection morning—the sleep of the body that is worn out with the heat and burden of the day."

"And what of the soul, papa?"

"That will be for ever with the Lord! We know very little of the state of the Redeemed after death! Only we are sure that they are blessed perfectly and for ever: they will sin no more, and suffer no more, and God has wiped away all tears from their eyes. Absent from the body, they are present with the Lord; and one of old tells us that in His presence is fulness of joy, at His right hand pleasures for evermore!"

Another time—a bright, sweet Sunday morning—not the next morning after the Saturday evening I have just spoken of, but one week later—the first Sabbath morning in July. It was indeed a calm, sweet morning, cool and bright; the very spirit of peace seemed to be brooding over land and sea; the hills seemed basking in the placid sunshine, and a thymy fragrance filled the air as the gentle breeze stole softly over us. The bells of North Combe Church were chiming for the morning service, and when they ceased, we heard—low and sweet, like the echo of the music we had just been listening to—the bells of St. Eldred's ringing softly in the distance.

A carriage was at the door;—not the unpretending pony

and chaise in which the doctor took his professional rounds, but a luxurious chariot, well-cushioned, and on easy springs, sent by our neighbour, Mr. Fennell, for my father's use that day. For he was going to church again,—going once more, after many weeks' absence from his accustomed place.

Mirrie and I walked to church through thewinding lane, its banks all tapestried with fairest July flowers, and its hedges hung with garlands of fragile briar-roses, and wild white briony; then up the green slopes, where we trod the tiny burnet-roses underfoot whenever we left the beaten track; and so to the grey Lych-gate, and up the churchyard path to the deep porch where Clara Berners and I had watched the sunset on Christmas-eve. She came up to me now, leaving the school-children whom she was marshalling to their seats,—came to ask if my father were any better.

"Yes, indeed," I answered brightly; "he will be at church this morning. He is coming in Mr. Fennell's carriage;—our own is not easy enough for a convalescent."

"And you really think he is convalescent?"

"Oh, yes! he has been better ever since that very great heat passed away. If he were not much better he would not think of being here."

"It is the day for Holy Communion; he remembered that, I dare say."

"Yes; that made him so anxious to be here."

"But will not the whole service be too much for him?"

"Oh, no! you do not know how very much dear papa has improved since the cooler weather set in. He will sit in mamma's corner to-day, and you know how cozy that is. I think he will not be very tired."

"He must, then, be better indeed. But if the doctor would prefer it, I am sure the vestry is at his service till the sermon is over."

I thanked Clara, and she went on to her seat in the chancel, and I said to Mirrie, "People think papa is worse than he is; they seem scarcely able to believe in his amendment. It is really quite depressing."

Mirrie turned her head away, but not so quickly as to

hide the tears just springing forth. What did everybody mean by being so gloomy and lachrymose? I asked myself impatiently. But just then the chariot reached the gates, and I hastened to meet my parents and give Clara Berners' message to my father.

My mother looked anxious, and she said, "My dear, might it not be better, more prudent? The whole service *is* very long for an invalid, and I am sure—"

But here papa interposed. "No, Maggie; I will sit by your side this morning: if I am tired I can rest for the remainder of the day."

Then we entered the church, and took our seats in the square pew that belonged to Kelver House, and the service soon commenced. Apart from all other services stands out the service of that morning. Looking back through the lapse of years, I see the dear familiar place,—the richly-tinted rays of sunlight streaming in through one of the old painted windows upon a sixteenth century monument in the south aisle; I see the purple glory resting on the stiff coif and ruff of the stately dame, who kneels with clasped hands, and all her daughters in like costume and position, and beautifully graduated in size, kneeling behind her; and the crimson flush that lights up the marble cheek of the good squire her husband opposite, also kneeling with joined hands, and his graduated sons behind him! And I see the deep-browed chancel, and the old dilapidated screen; the pulpit in the corner, with its heavy sounding-board, held up apparently by stout-limbed cherubs; and the reading-desk, and Dr. Berners in his surplice, and old Jonathan the clerk—shaking his palsied head, on which the snows of more than eighty winters had fallen—in his seat below. And I heard the notes of the *Te Deum*, the shrill voices of the children and the deeper voices of the village choir and of all the people, joining in that glorious hymn of praise, which day by day, for centuries on centuries, has pealed forth, "*Thou art the King of Glory, O Christ!*" Then I listened coldly and heedlessly; now—blessed be God!—my heart responds, "Yea, Lord, THOU—

only Thou." And I hear the solemn Litany; I hear the minister say, "In all time of our tribulation, in all time of our wealth, in the hour of death, and in the day of judgment, good Lord deliver us." And presently, like harp-notes from another sphere, "O Lamb of God, that takest away the sins of the world, grant us Thy peace!" All beyond seems like a dream till, the service being over, I get up, and go away with Mirrie and others, while the Feast is spread for those who may "draw near with faith and thanksgiving." A strange yearning makes me unwilling to depart, and, when the last of the dispersing congregation has left the churchyard, I suggest to Mirrie that we should creep up to the organ-loft—for there is a way through the tower which I know is open—and wait there till the service is over.

And this we do; and, looking down into the quiet church, we listen to the prayer which at its close breaks forth into blessing for "all Thy servants departed this life in Thy faith and fear," and to the "comfortable words" of our Lord Jesus Christ, "Come unto Me, and I will give you rest," and to the voices which say, "Therefore, with angels and archangels, and with all the company of heaven, we laud and magnify Thy glorious name; evermore praising Thee, and saying, Holy, holy, holy, Lord God of Hosts,—heaven and earth are full of Thy glory: glory be to Thee, O Lord, most high."

And presently, we watch the worshippers going up to the table of the Lord, and I see my father and my mother kneeling side by side, and they eat of the bread in remembrance that Christ died for them, and feed on Him in their hearts, with thanksgiving; and they drink of the cup that reminds them of the Blood which preserves their body and soul unto everlasting life. There are not many communicants; and the Feast is soon over, and sweetly sounds the "Glory be to God on high," and then, the blessing of peace and the murmured Amen; and all is ended, and we make haste to steal away and go home again down the flowery hill, and by the shady lane that winds pleasantly to the shore. And all the rest of the day

is very peaceful, and papa, weary indeed, but not worse,—he says himself, not at all the worse,—lies on the sofa in his favourite bay-window, and we read to him, both Mirrie and I, and then mamma sits by him and reads to him some verses we have never heard before :—

"For where Thou art, we too would be—
We through the grave would follow Thee;
Thy Spirit's light around us cast,—
Faith waxing brighter to the last.

"Till on the everlasting shore,
Where signs and symbols are no more,
Thy perfect beauty we may trace,
And see Thee, Saviour, face to face."

One more day I must retrace,—another Sunday, just a fortnight later. Papa was very weary that day, but rather better in himself, he told us, and he insisted on our going to church in the morning, Susan only remaining at home. When we came back to dinner, he still complained of lassitude and chilliness, though the day was almost sultry. Mamma made him drink some hot wine and water, and he soaked it in some thin, dry toast, and, when he gave her back the tumbler, he said, "Maggie, you always know what will do me good. Now I will try to go to sleep." Mamma laid a woollen shawl over him, and we went to dinner. Once or twice she stole into the library to see if papa had fallen asleep; but he was still reading, and he said that he felt very comfortable, and would soon, doubtless, doze off, he had had so bad a night, or, rather, several bad nights. When tea-time came I begged that I might carry him his cup of tea, and I went; but at last sleep had visited him, and he lay in a deep slumber, the book he had been reading fallen from his hands, but still lying on the shawl. All that evening we kept very quiet: but, as the hours wore on, mamma became uneasy: "It is so long a sleep," she said; "and he will be so exhausted,—yet I do not like to wake him." The sun neared the horizon, Mirrie and Susan came home from evening church, and still papa slept on.

"Let us go in again, Margaret," said mamma, at last. "I think we had better wake him, he ought not to be so

long without nourishment." We went into the library, and mamma laid her hand lightly on his hands, that were very loosely clasped. Oh! such a change came over her as she started, and with eager gesture drew back the crimson curtain! Then we saw that the dear face was ashen-grey; it was the curtain that had cast that glow of life upon the death-cold features: it was but dust we looked upon; the spirit had gone home!

I was fatherless, and my mother was a widow. And, though I knew it not, my childhood passed away from me there and then, and I became a woman for all time. The voyage of life lay before me; but *he* had reached the Haven.

CHAPTER XII.

MY UNCLE CROFTON.

I THOUGHT as I stood gazing on the dear face that would never brighten into smiles again till, raised and glorified, it met the Resurrection sunrise, that my cup of woe was full to overflowing. I was wrong: another sorrow—ay, battalions of sorrows, were awaiting me! I had forged troubles for myself by my own evil tempers and cherished sins; I had darkened the sunshine which God had showered about my path; I had made myself miserable when all around ministered to my full content; and now—now a real and heavy trouble had fallen upon me; the sunshine I had so little prized was hidden in impenetrable gloom, and nothing now could fill my heart with joy. From that evening when my mother was carried away to her bed insensible, she never left it: a few weeks more and I shared to the full the estate of Miriam Downing. I was an orphan and desolate. When I try to remember all that befel after that dreadful Sunday evening, I grow confused; perplexity and dread surrounded me everywhere, and a mist seems to have gathered about that dreary time which the lapse of years has failed to dissipate.

After papa's funeral-day the summer weather was suddenly broken up, torrents of rain swept across the misty hills, wild winds woke the fury of the waves, and the shore lay bare and desolate beneath an ever-frowning sky; and day by day I watched by my mother's bedside, and knew that slowly, slowly the light of life was fading from her face. Many of our medical friends came to see her, and various prescriptions and certain kinds of nourishing food were tried, and Dr. Berners came, and Clara, and the Misses Everett, and many others, my father's late patients, who had esteemed and loved him much; and all tendered their mite of consolation, and some tried to soothe, and some to rouse, and some to entertain, but all failed utterly: the mind was as clear and generally as calm as ever, but the delicate physical frame had sunk beneath the blow; from that fatal hour a sort of decay had set in, and nothing could arrest its progress. Before they had laid papa in his quiet grave, not far from Mrs. Downing's, I knew that mamma would not long be a widow; and she knew it also, and but for my sake would have been most glad.

Once I remember a well-meaning and really friendly person came to see us, and she was one of those who tried the rousing system; and, sitting in mamma's room, she told us all the gossip of the Hill, and what changes were expected in St. Eldred's. Oh! what did it matter to us! How the light chat jarred upon my ear! how the gay corn-flowers in Mrs. Manners' fashionable autumn bonnet seemed to oppress me with their glare! And then she finished up by saying, "You will be downstairs in a week, and then, my dear Mrs. Torrington, anything I can do for you—but you know how it would delight me to be of use. And I asked Susan if you had your weeds, and she said, 'No! nobody had thought about such things.' But, of course, they must be thought about; and it is not to be expected that you should trouble yourself or Margaret either. This is one of the times when friends should come forward and prove themselves; and, if you will give me the commission, I will order all that is required. Why, you

will be sitting up in a day or two, and you must have caps; you will look lovely in your cap—yours is such a Madonna style of beauty. Now, that is really something to be thankful for; some women do look such frights in widow's weeds. As a rule, do you know, I think the fashion of wearing what we call *weeds* is only a sort of mitigation of the suttee, a barbarous custom, to which, however, we must conform or lose our characters, to say nothing of the slight we put upon the dear departed."

And so she rattled on to my infinite disgust and anger: her rousing system, as far as it went, succeeded with me very well, and for the moment I almost forgot my misery. But mamma it did not touch; she lay back on her pillow very still and calm, her sweet dark eyes filled with a peace I could not comprehend. It was nothing to her, all this vain babble about caps, and crapes, and weepers; it gave her neither pain nor satisfaction.

When she was fairly gone, mamma said to me, "Margaret dear, do not let any one else come up stairs: I will see no one but Dr. Berners and Alice Tredgold."

"You shall not, mamma, darling," I replied most earnestly. "They are a silly, tattling set on the Hill. And as for that Mrs. Manners, flaunting her sympathy and her scarlet poppies when neither are required—"

"Hush, dear; hush! ungentle words pain me. Mrs. Manners does not mean to be unkind; only she is mistaken, she has not fine perceptions, and then she has certain notions of her own."

"Stupid, vulgar notions!"

"Ah, Margaret!"—and my mother smiled sadly—"you will give yourself much trouble and vexation if you tilt with the world like that."

But tilting was rather to my taste, and there was something in my temperament always luring me into antagonisms; that was one reason why I got on so badly with my schoolfellows, and failed to win the affections of my governesses.

After that day no more visitors were admitted to the sick

chamber, only the two mamma had chosen—her kind pastor and Alice Tredgold, who often shared my watch, and shed around us an atmosphere of peace and trust. But as the autumn wore away, the one life so closely linked with mine faded and faded. The days passed quietly on, and there was little actual pain—only weariness and weakness; but every Saturday night, when I looked back through the week, I could perceive that the decline was more apparent, the end visibly approaching.

Ah! those dark days, when the autumn winds swept wildly all around; when the flowers in the garden below drooped all uncared-for on the saturated mould, for it was the wettest, stormiest September I ever recollect; when the fishing-boats came scudding home before the gale; when now and then, in dark, tempestuous nights, we heard far away, sullenly booming at intervals, the guns of vessels in distress; when the mists gathered on the hills, cold, leaden, and impenetrable; and when the morning rose, weird and grey, the sea foaming on the rocks, and rolling its sable waves with the voice of heavy thunder high on the lonely shore! Dark days, indeed — days when my anguished heart said to every effort intended to console, "Miserable comforters are ye all."

One evening mamma had a long conversation with Dr. Berners. She had asked me to stay down stairs; and, the night being calm and the moon at the full, I put on my bonnet and shawl and went into the garden, and from thence I strayed out upon the shingle, for there was no living creature to be seen, and the murmur of the receding tide soothed the sense of pain and weariness which all the afternoon had made me restless. I strolled on till I came to a ridge of rock, where I sat down, and gave myself up to meditation, and I thought and thought of all the brightness and sweetness that had for ever passed away, and of that which even now was passing from me, till I could bear no more, and I burst into an irrepressible agony of weeping.

And Gilbert was gone away: if he had been at St. Eldred's I thought I should feel less lonely when the time

came that I knew was coming fast; and then I began to think—should I be at St. Eldred's always? Certainly I could not stay on by myself at Kelver House, with only Susan and Mirrie; and then I wondered where I should stay, and what would become of me, left to battle with the world. I should have some money, I supposed, very little perhaps, but that did not matter, it was not poverty I dreaded. Indeed, we had always been considered poor, and economy always had to be practised in our household, and I thought it not half so unpleasant as it was sometimes represented. Ah! what knew I of actual poverty?—I, who had never known a real want—I, whose home had ever been replete with homely comfort, simple elegance, and even some few luxuries?

Poverty is such a comparative thing. Some people unaccustomed to display, and asking "but little here below," think £100 a-year a very comfortable income; while there are others who, from force of circumstance and habits of a lifetime, think themselves sadly pinched on £5,000 per annum.

Ah! I had much to learn; as who has not at fifteen? And I had not learned the most important of all lessons, and so knew not the true secret of riches—viz., *contentment*, founded on a perfect trust in a heavenly Father's loving-kindness in this world, as well as in that which is to come!

I got up at last from my rocky seat, for the breeze that swept over the bay, though mild, was not exactly warm; and, feeling chilled, I walked back across the sands and the shingle to my home; and there, at the hall-door, I encountered Dr. Berners going away. Jem, the boy who managed our garden and the stable, just then came round with the doctor's horse, and, as he mounted, he gave me his hand: "I shall be here again in a day or two, Margaret," he said; "and, in the meantime, if any trouble arises, send for me."

"What do you think of mamma?"

"Going—going very fast! But take courage, Margaret, remember who is the Father of the fatherless. Trust in

God, and He will never forsake you. I have written to your uncle, and I am going to post the letter at St. Eldred's; there will just be time. Good night, my child. Anything I *can* do for you, you know will be done heartily, and Clara will only be too pleased to make herself useful. Good night, God bless you!"

And he was gone before I had time to collect my scattered thoughts. What could he mean by writing to my uncle? However, I could go in and ask mamma. Which resolve I immediately carried into execution, and to my surprise, I soon ascertained that I had rightly understood Dr. Berners, he *had* written to my uncle at mamma's request, and he was anxious that not a single post should be lost.

"But, mamma, what uncle?"

"Your Uncle Crofton, darling. You do not know him, and you have never heard me speak of him. Margaret, dear, I must tell you a little about my family. You believe that I was an only child, and so I was—the only child of my mother, my father's second wife. The first family never approved of this second marriage, there were four sons and a daughter; and I, younger by many years than any of them, never found favour in their sight. My mother died when I was eighteen, and afterwards I was very unhappy at home, for my father never seemed to care very much about me, and the two brothers still unmarried evidently cared less. I saw your father, and we loved one another; but my family, notwithstanding the slight regard they had ever evinced towards me, now chose to forbid the marriage, calling it a *mésalliance!* It was not so, because the Torringtons were a good old Devonshire family; but your father was poor, and the Croftons were rich and thriving. I obeyed my father so far as to promise him that while he lived I would never marry without his consent, and several years passed away very sadly for me, Margaret, in my splendid home, of which I was nominally mistress, only brightened now and then by letters from your father, bidding me take comfort and wait patiently for the happiness that would surely come in God's good time. In three years

after my engagement my father died suddenly from an injury received in hunting, and very soon I discovered that both my brothers were on the point of bringing home their brides. They needed me no longer, and I did not believe that I owed to them the obedience I had rendered to a parent. I did not exactly run away, for I was more than twenty-one, and I was free to go whenever and wherever I chose; but I married without their sanction, and they cast me off as if I never had belonged to them; moreover, I found that, excepting a trifle of a few hundreds that I inherited from my own mother, the fortune assigned me by my father's will passed from me if I married without the full consent of three of my four brothers."

"What a shame, mamma! And they only half-brothers!"

"We will not call it so now, my dear; my father believed that he acted for the best. We must always judge people by their motives; not by the results, which, when they make mistakes, are often disastrous. So I came to your father, and we were very happy in our simple home, that at first was empty of many things, but never of love: and as time passed on, his practice increased, and if it had pleased God to give him vigorous health, I doubt not he would have been among the foremost in his profession, and what we call a thriving man. But it was not to be; long, long ago, disease laid her hand upon him, and he was compelled to forego the golden prospects that had dawned upon us, and were brightening day by day. You know all that, Margaret, and you know that your dear father was never rich in this world's pelf."

"I know, mamma. He gave too much away to be rich: he not only gave advice and medicine gratis to those who had not wherewithal to pay, but he gave what he called kitchen physic gratis also. And his purse was always open when anybody needed help. No; he never could have been rich, even had his income been much more."

"Not rich in gold and silver, dear; but, oh! how rich in heavenly treasure!"

"But, mamma, why write to this Uncle Crofton?"

"My dear, you must be cared for—you and little Mirrie. Yes; I promised your father I would care for her while I lived, and afterwards—"

"Mamma, I could manage for myself, if it must be; and I would share what I have with Mirrie: but, oh! do not let me belong to people I have never seen."

"My darling, I am afraid you will have nothing to manage, nothing to share with Miriam Downing: some one who understands business must attend to your affairs, and your own relative is the fittest person."

"Where does my Uncle Crofton live, mamma?"

"At Cotswoldbury, in Gloucestershire. He married an heiress who resided there, and she likes no other place so well."

"Perhaps he will not come."

"I think he will—I hope he will, my dear; it will comfort me greatly to leave you in his charge."

A week passed away, but no letter from Uncle Crofton; and in my heart I hoped none ever would arrive, for I was not prepared to love him or esteem him on the bare plea of consanguinity; and nothing that my mother had told me of him had caused me to regard him with the slightest favour.

But towards the close of one gloomy, rainy afternoon, I, sitting in my mother's room,—she was very weak now, and her voice was little more than a whisper,—heard sounds of an arrival. I crept away to still the disturbance, if it were in my power; but something told me that it was my Uncle Crofton, and that he would not heed any words of mine. Downstairs I went with a beating heart, more and more convinced that I had divined the truth, till at length, pausing in the hall, I heard a loud voice saying, "*You* are not Miss Torrington?"

"No, I am Miriam Downing!"

"Are you a visitor?"

I hastened to present myself: little as I loved Mirrie, I wished to relieve her from interrogations, which must be painful; and *he*,—what right had he to catechise her in such fashion? I entered the parlour, and there, standing

on the hearth, his back to the fire, in true Englishman's style, was a tall, handsome-looking man, slightly grey, but still in all the prime and flower of life. I courtesied and held my peace.

The keen eyes looked me through and through, and then the same voice I had heard addressing Miriam, said, "Ah! you are Margaret Torrington?"

I admitted that I was, and waited for another question. It came quickly enough, "How old are you?"

"Fifteen and two months."

"No more! You are tall enough for eighteen. Run up like an ill weed, eh?"

Which proposition I did not admit; and so my Uncle resumed, "Who is this child?"

"Miriam Downing."

"I know so much already; but is she any relation?—is she living here?"

I explained as well as I could, with every nerve tingling and every pulse throbbing, while Mirrie, under cover of my speech, fled away to Susan, who was bustling about the kitchen, and, to quote her own expression, "in as big a tantivy as ever she was in all her life, with him asking if dinner would soon be ready, and requesting that it might be hastened, but not unduly hurried: and dinner over hours ago, and all the dishes washed, and the tea-kettle on the boil, and the bread cut for the toast."

My uncle heard my story to the end, and then he exclaimed, "Just like Dick Torrington. Because he was not poor enough, and could not provide for his own child, he must needs go and charge himself with another man's baby. She is a very pretty child though, and her face will be her fortune—or her curse! You wouldn't be bad-looking, Margaret, if you had some colour, and if you were not so thin. And is it the sea-air that causes you to walk head foremost? You must make the best of your advantages, child; for I am afraid they will be but few. I did not like the tone of Dr. Berners' letter. Does your mother know I am come?"

"I thought not;" so Mr. Crofton continued, "Let her know that I will see her, if convenient, after dinner; and, by the way, I hope dinner will not be long in making its appearance. What is your usual hour?"

"We have dined; we dined at half-past one."

"Lunched you mean?"

"No,—*dined*." And I spoke it out bravely, determined not to be frightened.

The gentleman's countenance became overcast. "Dear me, I might have thought you would have fallen into country ways; I might have dined at the hotel. But you have something in the house? Can your cook extemporise? Mine is a genius, but she insists on two subordinates."

I said I would go and see, and I sped away like an arrow to Susan to consult her on the tremendous difficulty that had arisen.

Now, there happened to be chops in the house, and a chicken ready for dressing, and plenty of eggs; so, deriving courage and inspiration from the emergency, Susan set to work, and achieved three excellent dishes with marvellous rapidity.

After having dined, and ascertained that we had no wine to suit his palate, Mr. Crofton went upstairs to see his sister. The two had not met for nearly eighteen years. An hour afterwards he came down looking very grave and uneasy, and he was strangely silent while I poured out his tea. But at last, when he had declined taking any more, he pushed away his cup and saucer, energetically exclaiming, "Well, Miss Margaret, you have managed matters finely down here by the sea-side. It seems to me that you'll not have a sixpence to call your own when affairs are settled. Mind, I don't say certainly that it will be so, but your money matters are in a frightful tangle, and Maggie—your mamma, I mean—just knows nothing about them. I shall look into it, of course, and if I can save anything for you, you may be sure I shall; but, dear me, dear me, things look very ugly, I can tell you!"

I was so glad to get away from him that I scarcely cared

about the portentous aspect of affairs; but when I lay down in bed that night and heard the wind moaning dismally about the house, it struck me that it would be very unpleasant "not to have a sixpence to call my own."

CHAPTER XIII.

"MY AFFAIRS."

I HOPED my uncle would go away next day, but he did not; and at last, to my extreme indignation, I overheard him telling Dr. Berners there must be a change soon, and he would wait till all was over. "*Till all was over!*" The words rang in my ears as I fled from the house into the garden; I scarcely knew where I went; anywhere, anywhere to be out of the sound of that cruel, heartless voice! Yes, all would be over when mamma was taken from me,—I could not look beyond that time; the grave where one parent was already lying, and whither another was hastening, seemed the boundary of my horizon. I felt as if in some sort my life would end there; I did not think I should die, but all my hopes, and fears, and aspirations would be ended. "What would become of me?" I really cared very little. I should not starve, I supposed, and I should have some kind of shelter for my wearied head; as for the rest, it mattered not. And all unconsciously, I endorsed the sentiment of Byron's Medora:—

"With nothing left to love, there's nought to dread."

And Mirrie,—had she no anxieties,—she, more really desolate than I, since no one in all the world claimed kindred with her? She was twelve years old now, and at an age to feel keenly the perplexities of her position, and, at times, I think she did muse very painfully on what might be in store for her; but I never sought her confidence, as I never gave her mine. I had grown suddenly into a grave, sorrowful woman, and I regarded her as still a child,—a child whom I would protect if possible, but still one who

could not share the burden of my sorrow. The "change" for which my uncle waited came all too soon. As far as I remember, it was the twelfth of October when Mr. Crofton came to Kelver House; that day week, the blinds were drawn close down, and the hush of death was once more in our midst. Serenely beautiful she lay at rest, my gentle, blessed mother! It was a sight to look upon with solemn joy, that pure, perfect face, exquisite as if the sculptor's chisel had just left it, a miracle of loveliness, a triumph of his art! And not colder could have been the graven marble than that snow-white brow and pearly cheek, and those fair hands—wasted, indeed, but still so fair—crossed peacefully upon the breast,—the breast that would never again heave, sob, or sigh, or know the aching sense of loss! Even my uncle's stern face was changed when he came down from paying his last visit to that silent room, and he patted me on the shoulder and bade me cheer up, adding, half in soliloquy,—"I always said she was more lovely than any other woman I ever saw, and she might have married so well." And then turning suddenly to me—"Margaret, you will never be a beauty like your poor mother, but you will have a very fair share of good looks—the only share of good that will fall to you, I expect. Don't go and fling yourself away on the first man who talks poetry to you and asks you to share his humble home. Shun humble homes: they are all very well in novels and poems, and in fancy landscapes; but in real life they are just the deuce. Don't follow your mother's example, and leave a penniless daughter to be provided for some twenty years hence!"

I was too broken-hearted to reply, or I should doubtless have angered him, for if there was any other feeling in my heart than grief bitter and unfeigned, it was a feeling of horror at the idea of being provided for by him.

However, he had the mercy not to talk to me about "my affairs" till the funeral was over; though all day and every day he shut himself up in the library examining papers, going over accounts, and drawing up what he called "a statement." He was certainly a business man; and I began to perceive

as in spite of myself I watched his proceedings, and noticed the far-seeing skill which he brought to bear upon every iota of his task, that my poor father had *not* been business-like!

At last came the day when the coffin-lid covered all that remained to me of my mother; even the precious dust was borne away, and only the bare, empty room was left;—bare and empty like my heart, that brooded over its own great void with a grief too deep for tears. Miriam's sorrow was very great, but she cried freely, and on the funeral-day most passionately; and she tried in her simple way to comfort me, telling me how heaven was not so very far off when those we loved were there!—and how the parting was but for a season! But I, looking up into the great, silent sky that hung that day above the hills and over the sea like a dome of crystal, felt as if the distance were immeasurable—nay, infinite! I refused to hear one word of comfort: I was numb in my despair; I was like a person crushed in every limb, feeling little for the time, but knowing that hours of keenest torture were at hand. And Clara Berners came, the tears streaming down her face while she talked to me; and she too spoke of the little space between this life and that beyond the grave!

But nothing comforted me, nothing eased the aching sense of loss and utter desolation; I only wished to be left alone with my great sorrow. Yes, in that hour I first proved the utter insufficiency of human sympathy, of earthly sources of consolation: I felt myself to be beyond the reach of all who came about me in their tender pity; they could not speak to my stricken heart! One only was there who could have said to me, as He said to little Mirrie in her equal sorrow, "Peace *I* leave with you; *My* peace give I unto you; not as the world giveth give I unto you." But that ONE, that gracious, loving Friend, who sticketh closer than a brother, I knew not. Nay, I had refused to know Him! He had knocked at the door of my heart, and I had heard, and would not open.

The next morning I came down to breakfast, feeling wretchedly ill and nervous: I had slept from mere exhaus-

tion, but my sleep had been more like the stupefaction produced by drugs than a regular, healthful slumber,—no wonder that I rose unrested and unrefreshed. I gave my uncle his coffee, and then idly sipped my own; I made no effort to eat anything.

Presently, having made a pretty substantial repast, he said: "Now, Margaret, I want your attention for a little while in the library; your affairs, such as they are, must be settled. I would not intrude upon you while your poor mother was still upstairs; but now the last offices of affection have been performed, and though it is quite natural that you should continue to deplore your double loss, there is no reason, but very much the contrary, why you should not rouse yourself, and attend to those duties which lie before you."

I listened like a person in a dream to this exordium, and, rising mechanically, I prepared to obey, when suddenly my uncle stopped, and said severely, "Margaret! I want yourself, not a lay figure bearing your likeness. It is not enough that you listen to what I have to tell you; I require your serious attention."

I bent my head as an acknowledgment of this remark, but not for worlds could I have spoken, or assured him I would do my best; only, as I closed the library door behind me, and saw him already seated in my father's own chair, I did wonder stupidly what was going to be my fate,—for I knew I had come there to hear my sentence, whatever it might be.

"Sit down, Margaret!" was the first command,—for I was standing stonily against the table. "Sit down and bring your chair near to me. Now! I am told you are a very clever girl, and therefore I shall expect you not to be very stupid and slow in comprehending what I have to bring before you. In the first place, I suppose you know *you have to live?*"

Yes; I knew that well enough: it would have been very much easier, I thought, to die; only it takes so much to kill a really healthy person. Whatever poets and romance writers

may tell us, broken hearts, in the true sense of the word, are extremely rare. It is astonishing how much even a delicate frame can bear before the anguish severs soul and body. Byron says truly,—

"The heart may break, yet brokenly live on;"

and I once heard Susan say, "Oh! it takes a lot of killing to finish up some people. Hearts don't break, as my old song-book used to tell about; but they crack pretty often, and there are *some* cracks that time can never mend. Ah, well-a-day! cracked, or broken downright, they'll all be sound again in the next world if only they have been given here to the Master."

Having admitted that I did know I must still continue to exist in the flesh; which continuance I also knew must involve the need of proper food and raiment, my uncle propounded another question, which grew out of the first quite naturally,—"How, then, do you propose to live?"

Pitifully I glanced at him. Oh, if he would but leave me to myself a little longer! But I was only answered by the steady gaze that looked for my reply. It came at last. "Uncle, I do not know. Is there *nothing?*"

"Next to nothing. Look here, Margaret: here is a statement which Dr. Berners has seen and audited—this is his signature. It has cost me much trouble to go into every little trifle, and to bring it all to black and white as you see it now; but I thought it best that all should be clear and plain at once, that we might know where we really stood, and avoid mistakes, which would only cause needless pain when corrected. This is a list of all your father's debts and liabilities up to the time of his death; also of the bills resulting from both funerals; and of some small accounts still due, which have naturally been running on during Mrs. Torrington's illness. And here on this side is the account of all moneys in actual possession, and all legally due to the estate: when the horse and gig and the furniture are sold, there will be something more; but even this addition, at a fair valuation, leaves you only mistress of about £400, and

perhaps a few articles of plate, and other little things you may like to retain for yourself."

"Four hundred pounds! So much, uncle!"

"So much! Is the girl crazy? If I invest this money for you, as, of course, I shall, it will not bring you in more than five per cent. I grant you might get more on mining companies or railways, and such like bubble-and-squeak concerns, but it would never be secure; and some fine morning you might wake up and find your capital gone, and, of course, your interest with it. I am not sure that I can even get you five per cent.; really safe and sure things are generally three, and three and a half, and four per cent., even lower sometimes, as you will see in time. But take it for granted that your £400 is put out at five per cent., what income does that bring you in—eh?"

"Twenty pounds, uncle."

"Exactly, Miss Torrington! I am glad to perceive you have some business capabilities,—some women would have had to cover a sheet of foolscap with figures before they arrived at the result, which you attain by a simple mental process. Well, do you think twenty pounds per annum will find you in board and lodging,—feed you properly, clothe you decently, shelter you respectably, to say nothing of times of sickness and unforeseen emergencies?"

Now, though my uncle had complimented me on my business capabilities, I was really quite ignorant as to the true value of money—I had no idea how far £20 a-year would go; but my late experience in housekeeping, with Susan for my major-domo, had suggested that it would not go very far. And then Mirrie! she had not £400, and I had made a sacred promise. I said, therefore, "I am afraid it would not be enough. And there is Miriam Downing."

"Confound Miriam Downing! Let the Downings see to the Downings; we have to do with Croftons and with Torringtons."

I looked my uncle steadily in the face, and as steadily I said, "Uncle, I do not love Miriam Downing—"

"I have found that out; and the discovery proves to me that you are no ordinary woman; for, by all that is ridiculous, I could be foolish about that child myself."

I continued quietly:—"But my father and my mother both loved her; and I promised mamma that I would share with her whatever fell to my lot. I will keep my promise!"

"Whew! Miss Torrington and Miss Downing keeping house on £20 a year! You would be in *the* house before the year was out."

"I think not, uncle. We could *work!* You appear to forget that."

"May I be pardoned if I desire to know what kind of work two young ladies would select?"

I paused for my answer. Well, Mirrie was "handy," as Susan said, and she could do "a sight of little things." But I—I knew some Latin, and, thanks to Miriam, some tolerable French; indeed, I knew a great many things; but unless I could teach them to others, I hardly saw how they could profit me. Meanwhile I could not sew decently, I could not cook, I could not do housework! How could classics, natural history, and general culture be turned to account, which means *coined into money?* But I thought of my music, and I knew I had power there, and on the spur of the moment I said I would teach music and singing.

My uncle laughed as he replied: "I believe you may—*some day!* Decidedly, you have musical talent, if not genius; though when you played at my request you were under disadvantages. It was scarcely a time for tunes and songs, as your face said to me. By the way, you must learn to regulate that face of yours a little. But I wished to know something of your capabilities. Now, if your musical education were completed, you might do something in that way in the present state of things who do you think would engage an instructress who has herself taken lessons for just one year?"

I hung my head more in weariness than shame; but I knew he spoke the truth. After all, what did my music

come to? It was more what I felt it might be, than what it actually was. I had made immense progress in one year; but then, as Mr. Crofton said, would any one pay a teacher who had studied just one year? And the last three months, except at his request, I had not touched the pianoforte. Clearly I could not get my own bread, and support Mirrie Downing, by the exercise of my musical abilities, at present!

"Besides," interposed Mr. Crofton, "I should not choose you to commence such a life so early in youth. No! I have already made the necessary arrangements; I have advised with your aunt, and she consents to receive you into our family. All things being considered, we think it best. I should not care for its being said that a Crofton was getting her living as a governess!"

"But I am not a Crofton—I am a Torrington," I replied, —my native spirit of independence rising up in arms.

"It is known now that your mother was a Crofton, and I cannot permit her daughter to remain without suitable protection."

"But Uncle—"

"Margaret, I did not request you to come here to propound your own views; I merely wished your attention while I explained to you the settlement of your affairs. It is then arranged that you become, for the present at least, an inmate of our own house at Cotswoldbury. Your Aunt Louisa is good enough to receive you, and you really ought to be very grateful."

I tried to stammer out something, but words of thanks would not rise to my unwilling lips; what I did express, or rather, what I failed to express, my uncle graciously received as acquiescence.

He continued, "The advantages to you will be self-evident and manifold; association with your cousins will, I trust, give you somewhat of the style in which you are so sadly deficient. You can cultivate your musical tastes, I daresay; and I trust you will make yourself agreeable and *generally useful*."

Had I had any experience of the world the last sentence would have startled me,—as it was, something in its tone

annoyed me. Had I had any idea of what is implied by "making one's self generally useful;" had I known then, as I know now, how very industrious, self-sacrificing, energetic, meek and amiable, untiring and submissive, underpaid governesses, humble companions, and poor relations are, as a rule, required to be, I believe nothing, short of actual coercion, would have induced me to give in my adhesion to the Cotswoldbury scheme. I ventured, however, one more remonstrance: "But what is to become of Miriam Downing? Don't be angry, uncle"—for I saw his countenance growing dark;—"but I promised mamma I would take care of her."

"You *cannot* take care of her; that is the long and the short of the matter: you might as well have promised her to keep a chariot and four, and a train of servants. Next time you make promises see that it lies in your power to fulfil them! However, that difficulty is, singularly enough, removed: when I paid the Miss Everetts your school-bill yesterday they both asked anxiously if Miriam Downing were also going to Cotswoldbury. The idea of the thing! How stupid old maids are, to be sure! I told them very plainly that I only concerned myself about my own flesh and blood—that I was no philanthropist, picking up children like stray cats, without knowing anything of their antecedents. You were my half-sister's child; it therefore became my duty to look after you and see that you were respectably provided for: but the Downing girl, being nothing to me, must attend to her own interests."

"What did they say?"

"The eldest of the two old maids rose up as if she were going to make a presentation curtsey; then, almost turning her back on me, she made quite a speech, and, as near as I can remember, it was as follows:—'Sister Henrietta, this decides the matter; we will carry out the plan that occurred to us so simultaneously: we will take this dear child and adopt her as our niece; we will educate her, and train her in our own ways. We are growing old, and she will help us in our school, and perhaps take our place when we are

laid in the grave or superannuated. Sir, you will be good enough to send Miss Downing to us,—she shall be the child of our old age!' And thereupon Sister Henrietta replied: —'Sister Martha, though you generously attribute to me a full share in your benevolent proposition, you were the first to suggest so desirable a scheme. You proposed it, if you remember, the night before last; we were going up to bed, and the clock on the stairs was exactly at twenty-five minutes past ten, and we were standing by the door of the little room where the day scholars keep their bonnets and tippets.' 'You seconded the proposition before it was well declared,' was Sister Martha's answer; and as the two old ladies seemed inclined to quarrel amicably on the point, I pocketed my receipt and took my departure, promising to convey to Miriam Downing the news of her good fortune. I would not promise actually to send her to Hawthorn House, as they call their great, rambling place, because, as Miss Downing has no claim on me, I have no authority to dispose of her;—it is my maxim never to meddle with other people's encumbrances."

I was silent, and wondered how many "encumbrances" my uncle might have of his own, and also whether my cousins really loved their father.

Clearly nothing could be better for Miriam than this arrangement: a happy home was offered her, where she would be loved, and cared for, and educated, and where she might become, in process of time, a helper and mainstay, rather than a mere dependent. And Mirrie herself, though she cried bitterly at the prospect of leaving Kelver House, accepted the proposition of the Misses Everett without a moment's hesitation. "If only she were not so stupid," she said; "but she would work hard, and she thought she might take the two lower classes in a year or two, and so save the expense of a junior teacher. And then her French, she knew, was worth something, because it was real French. Oh! everybody was good to her, and God always took care of her, as her mamma had said He would if she trusted in Him."

And if the Misses Everett had not thus come forward, there would have been another home for Mirrie at the rectory. Clara Berners wanted her "for a little sister," and was with difficulty prevented from contesting the claims of the two old ladies. It was astonishing how much love the little girl had won.

Nothing now remained but the sale of the furniture and necessary preparations. The important business concluded, my uncle went away, leaving me to follow in a fortnight's time, when everything would be entirely settled. I was grateful to him for leaving me that one fortnight unfettered by his presence. Those fourteen days I would give to the past, to old friends, and old scenes, and to tender, passionate adieux,—then for Cotswoldbury, and the new, stern life that lay before me!

CHAPTER XIV.

THE OLD COACH-DAYS.

THAT last fortnight at St. Eldred's was, as you may imagine, a very trying time, and even while I fondly lingered, I longed for the parting to be over. My uncle had told me to choose for myself whatever small articles of furniture I cared to retain; and so, on the night before the auctioneer's man came to make out the catalogue, I went over the house selecting and rejecting with a painful sense of the misery that had come upon me, and a yearning desire to preserve from profanation everything that had been touched by those dear hands which I, alas! could clasp no longer.

I stayed in my old home till the eve of the sale, till everything was numbered, and till every apartment looked like a lumber-room or a broker's shop, and then I went away to the rectory for the three days yet remaining, before I started for Cotswoldbury. Clara and her father were very kind to me; but their kindness served rather to aggravate my woe, since very soon I should be far removed from them, and

from all sympathizing friends, to dwell in a land of strangers. It was some little consolation, however, to know that many of my possessions passed into the keeping of those who would value them for the sake of old reminiscences. Dr. Berners himself purchased much of the library furniture, and many of the books; the Misses Everett bought my pianoforte, which I had reluctantly concluded not to take with me to Cotswoldbury; Mrs. Tredgold had some eight or ten lots knocked down to her; and Susan at the end of the day proclaimed herself the owner of nearly all the kitchen apparatus, and of divers carpets, beds, and tables, to say nothing of odd lots of "sundries," which included the queerest medley of articles, varying from a garden-roller out of repair to a broken towel-horse, and a cracked ewer, and badly-chipped water jug; for Susan was going to set up housekeeping on her own account at No. 7, Seaview-terrace, on the other side of the town.

"You are going to be married, I suppose, Susan?" said Mrs. Manners, when, on the day previous to the sale, she made inspection of the lots, and stated incidentally her need of a clever cook. "£14 a year, Susan, and beer, and tea, and everything found, and the washing put out, and followers allowed, if they are respectable!"

Whereupon Susan replied that she did not intend to take another service. She had done a good day's work for a good day's wages ever since she was twelve years old; and now she was seven-and-forty, or would be come Candlemas-day, if, please God, she was spared till then: and she thought it was time to be independent; and she knew she never could abide another master and mistress; and she had an unruly tongue, and a snappish sort of temper; and it was best she should go to housekeeping and have a home of her very own.

"Then you *are* going to be married?" persisted Mrs. Manners, who could scarcely comprehend the nature of any establishment not a ladies' boarding-school, without some kind of male creature at its head.

And Susan grimly answered, "I aint such a fool, Mrs.

Manners. There's a good man here and there, no doubt, as makes a good husband; but they are 'rare specimens,' as poor master used to say when he brought home nasty things off the shore or stupid-looking weeds I should never have troubled *myself* to gather while I could get posies of bergamot, and pinks, and columbines in our own garden. Husbands are half of 'em scourges, Mrs. Manners, and the rest of 'em are 'cumber-grounds,' always under your feet, and meddling and marring what they don't understand. No, indeed!—no marrying for me! I don't want any matrimony, nor patrimony neither."

"Then are you going to live all by yourself? or, perhaps, you are going to keep a little shop, Susan?"

"Neither the one nor the other. I'm going to take a niece to live with me,—a child of my sister's, who married well, as it was thought, only he got seven years' transportation for doing something he didn't ought to have done; and I mean to let lodgings,—that is, apartments, if you want to put it genteelly. There's a sight of company taking to come to St. Eldred's now, and if one's honest, and painstaking, and civil, and doesn't keep a cat, one may prosper and get a little money, I should say."

"But why not keep a cat? Cats are supposed to be a comfort to unmarried females."

"And to married ones too, ma'am—and *they* want a deal more comforting in a regular way; but, you see, cats get into the pantry, and where there is a cat in the house she's made 'sponsible for all kinds of mischief. I was once in a house where the cat ate all the underpart of some three or four pounds of cold salmon, and she did it so neatly that you would have thought fingers had to do with it rather than claws. Then, again, she glided into the larder, and carried off a merry thought, or a breast of pheasant, and—would you believe?—she always left the remaining pieces quite prettily disposed, so as to fill up the vacant space. I never knew such a clever cat as she was,—only she was a *he*—a brindled, tabby Tom, very handsome and sleek, and given to much purring. Oh, the crockery-ware she—or he,

at least—used to break! Once, I remember, a beautiful soup-tureen was smashed into atoms, and the cat did that, though she *seemed* to be asleep under the laurels at the very moment the mischief occurred. Oh, I can't tell you all that that tabby Tom-cat did! She took to stealing lace collars at last, and then there was such a fuss, and all the servants were sent away at once with little better than no characters, and all because of a sleek, purring pussy-cat that didn't keep the commandments! No, ma'am, I'll never keep a cat and a lodging-house at the same time; there's no knowing how the best of cats might imperil my character."

But on the last evening of my residence at North Combe, Susan came to bid me good-bye. She took me in her brawny arms, and kissed me fondly, and then apologised for taking such liberties with a lady; "For you don't seem our Miss Margaret any more," she added, shaking her head lugubriously, "but a lady grown. Things have changed you, my poor dear, and you are every inch *Miss Torrington*."

Three months before I should have been pleased to be so appreciated, but now I felt that what I had gained in importance and in acknowledged womanhood was at the price of all the joy and freedom of my youth. Yes; I felt myself a woman, and though I had yearned and panted to be indeed no more a child, but a woman among women, I mourned now, with inexpressible regret, my lost and vanished youth. I was little more than fifteen, to be sure; but I felt as if I were five-and-thirty. Susan, who all this while was stroking my hand, as if I had been a veritable baby, continued, "There's one thing, my dear, I should like to say to you: you are going out into the world among strangers, and I hope the Lord will guide you and turn their hearts to you, so that they may become your friends;—but I am not sure that you are a good one at getting friends;—some gets friends naturally, like little Mirrie, and some doesn't. It is just the way of them. But if ever you do want a friend, Miss Torrington, remember you have a humble and respectful one always in Susan Pratten, of No. 7, Seaview-terrace, St. Eldred's West." I was sure of that, and very

precious seemed to me just then that simple, earnest friendship; and Susan went on, "So if ever, my dear, you should be in any great trouble, and not know where to put yourself respectably, be sure that I shall give you a hearty welcome, and be proud to entertain my dear master's daughter. Promise me, Miss Margaret, that if ever you are hard put to it,—and there is no knowing what may happen in a world like this,—promise me you will come to me, or send to me, and let me be your sincere and humble friend."

I promised, feeling deeply the simple truth and kindness of this faithful creature, who had alternately scolded, and lectured, and petted me ever since I could remember. And then, after a few more words, interrupted by sobs and prayers, Susan bade me good-bye, but turned again at the door to remind me that I might upon emergency always find a home with her at 7, Seaview-terrace, St. Eldred's West, or wherever she might be.

Before I lay down that night I looked out upon the sea, gleaming faintly in the starlight. Far away I could see the lighthouse softly shining like a planet, and dark against the broidered sky the broad grand summit of the black Tor Head. Ah! what should I see if another night I drew back my curtain, and gazed out into the shadowed world? Not, certainly, that vast expanse of sea and sky, and that long line of rugged cliff and undulating down; for Cotswoldbury was in one of the south-western midland counties, and its waters were its mineral springs and the wretched little river Cote, not deep enough to drown a baby, save after some tremendous fall of rain. But Cotswoldbury was a very fashionable and aristocratic town, though it had no coast, nor gracious tidal river rolling to the sea; and it is still a town of some importance, very clean, and very pleasant in the summer-time by reason of its shaded *boulevard*-streets, the like of which exists not in any other English town or city, and very gay with elegantly-dressed ladies, and very imposing with wrinkled dowagers and moneyed spinsters, who patronise "*Cavendish and Co.*" on the Promenade more liberally even than the younger and fairer feminines of Cots-

woldbury. I knew nothing about that despotic institution, yclept "*society*," till I had lived some time under the amphitheatre of hills that swelled around my new and inland home. In those days Cotswoldbury was the resort of innumerable patricians, even of royalty itself; and foreign potentates thronged to its spas, and quaffed their unpalatable draughts with apparent relish, and secret nausea and grimace. Now, alas! its glory is departed, and Ichabod is written on its pump-rooms; wealthy retired tradespeople have the impertinence to live on the same terraces as needy gentlefolk; young ladies, whose papas are vile enough to buy and sell calico and silk, or figs and composite candles, or jewellery, or photographic albums, play croquet on the self-same lawn, albeit they play not the same game, as the daughters of Greek and Polish counts, French *chevaliers*, and Italian *principessas*. Cotswoldbury has fallen from its high estate, though still the actual barrier between the trading and the non-trading portion of the community is as strong and high as ever; and it has what it had not in its more palmy days —two colleges—one for boys, the "sons of gentlemen," and the other for girls, the "daughters of gentlemen;" very select and very expensive both of them, though perhaps a little snobbish. A shopkeeper, though he were a modern Crœsus, could not get his daughter into that very genteel "Ladies' College;" at least, you must be professional if you wish your offspring to share in the educational advantages of the patrician ranks of Cotswoldbury.

But just for one minute to return to North Combe. I woke in the grey, cold dawn of the dull November morning, and knew before I was well awake that some momentous change awaited me. I sat up and looked out of the window, and saw a steely-grey sky hanging low over a steely-grey sea, and steely-grey mists clinging to the beetling cliffs, that rose, shadow-like, in the imperfect light of the early, sunless day. And with a dull, hollow murmur the waves rose and fell upon the lonely shore, and tangles of sea-weed lay at our very gate, washed up by the night spring-tide! Any one else would have thought the scene desolate in the

extreme, but to me it wore a beauty all its own. I loved the sea passionately as the Greek islander, who pined away his life in the Vale of Tempe; it was my friend,—my old grand, mysterious friend,—whose face I had seen in all its varying aspects ever since I could remember. What should I do without it! My life would not be so sad, I thought, if I could only now and again steal out and tell my troubles and my joys,—if, indeed, any more joys were in store for me, which I greatly doubted,—my cares and my aspirations to the winds and waters I had known so long and loved so well.

I was scarcely dressed when Clara came to call me, and then, not trusting ourselves to speak, we began to be busy about some little matters of packing, which, wisely or unwisely, had been left to the morning; wisely in this case, I am inclined to believe, since, in trying to lock a gaping portmanteau and in searching for a missing strap, we were so occupied, and necessarily so much interested, that scant leisure remained for the indulgence of vain regrets.

At last came the parting moment. I was placed in the carriage. Nearly all my luggage had gone on before in the carrier's cart; and Dr. Berners and I were on our way to the Golden Ram in the High-street, where the Bristol coach started every morning at ten o'clock. The horses were already put-to when we arrived, and only my seat in the interior of the lumbering vehicle was empty. A brief and fatherly adieu from the good Doctor, and a momentary clinging to him, as if, in sheer desperation, I would not let the old life go; a final "God bless and keep you, my poor girl!" and the coachman cracked his whip, and the impatient horses began their wonted journey. And when, at length, I recovered myself sufficiently to look about me, we had already passed the familiar landmarks of the road, and were slowly plodding up a steep hill, which led right over the Downs, into what had always seemed to me another world.

It was a dreary journey, and mists gathered round us as we proceeded on our way: it did not rain, but the clouds hung threateningly, the hills were shrouded, and a damp chilliness pervaded the atmosphere. Very soon the dreary

daylight faded into darkness, and hour after hour we rolled onwards, sometimes crawling up the eminences, sometimes clattering along in true business style; now drawing up at some wayside inn to change horses, or passing through some town or village, where there were lights, and people going to and fro, and where stout landladies and jaunty barmaids came out with glasses of ale, or spirits and water, for the coachman and the outside passengers; and now toiling on, —ever on, it seemed,—along the dark and muddy road, our feeble oil-lamp showing to us each other's pale and wearied faces, and the lamps of the coach now and then flashing momentarily on black hedge-rows, or wayside ponds, or blank walls shutting in some park or spacious garden. And once or twice we passed large houses, the windows all alight, as if its inmates were keeping festival; and I could almost fancy I heard the sound of music and tripping feet, and saw the smiles on fair young faces on which no shadows rested.

It was quite late when we went thundering over the stones through the narrow streets of Bristol, and most of the shops were closed when at last we stopped before the White Hart Inn, in Broad-street. I looked out anxiously enough; for an old friend of Dr. Berners was to meet me, and take me to his home on Kingsdown for the night. In the morning I was to resume my journey by another coach, which would take me as far as the cathedral city of Westonbury; and from thence I was to go to Cotswoldbury—a matter of about ten miles—by the railroad, which had not long since been opened. Peering out into the dull gas-light, I was aware of an elderly gentleman in clerical attire, of grave countenance and dignified demeanour. He was contemplating the passengers just arrived, as if among them he expected to find some one he was seeking. While I looked irresolutely, the face I had so hastily scanned came up to the coach-window,—stiff, grey hair, Roman nose, spectacles, and all; and a sonorous voice, in a sort of recitative, was asking, "Is Miss Torrington, late of St. Eldred's, within?"

Of course I replied that she was, and that I was the luckless "she" of whom he was in quest. Then he opened the

door, solemnly, as if it had been a pulpit-door,—only pulpit-doors are supposed to be always opened by attentive vergers, in readiness for their reverend occupants,—and solemnly he handed me out; and still in the same deep recitative tone, asked how many packages I had. Clara had, luckily, counted them, and written down the number in my pocket-book; so I was in a condition to be explicit, and also to remark that one small carpet-bag might go with me to his hospitable mansion, while all the rest of my luggage might remain at the office till such time as the Westonbury coach and I should be starting on the morrow. Which arrangement being completed, I was handed into a fly by the Rev. Peter Churchman, and once more I was carried through unknown regions, I knew not whither. Only after a little time it seemed to me that Kingsdown must be on the mountain-tops, so steep was the road we took, and so tardy was our progress. After Mr. Churchman had asked me if I knew Bristol at all, and after he had informed me that Kingsdown was "on the hill,"—I should think it was, indeed—he became silent, and not a word was exchanged between us till at length the fly stopped before a dark but highly-respectable door, set in a high stone wall, such as might have surrounded a nunnery or a lunatic asylum. Had I not had perfect trust in Dr. Berners, and had my natural *amour propre* been in its normal state, I should have been alarmed. But, the door being opened, all misgivings vanished. There was a broad gravel walk, which led to a flight of handsome stone steps, which conducted to another door,—still more respectable than the one in the garden-wall,—which opened into an old-fashioned stately hall, which led into an immense drab-coloured drawing-room, where, reading the *Record* paper, sat a drab-coloured lady, with a drab-coloured pussy-cat sleeping on her drab-coloured lap! Well I had not seen things *couleur-de-rose* for many a long day; so it did not matter very much. Even drab was a relief to the blackness of my own sad costume. Of course the drab-coloured matron was Mrs. Churchman, and she dislodged Madam Puss, and rose to give me a welcome, and inquire if I was tired, and if I was not very hungry.

I am ashamed to say I was hungry, very hungry,—a most improper feeling for the heroine in my situation; but I had eaten nothing but a biscuit or two since noon, and I had travelled more than a hundred miles, and youthful appetite and a good constitution would triumph over real sorrow and sore-heartedness. "Was I not very cold?" Indeed I was; but I had been cold so long that I had ceased to think about it, and the noble fire in the polished grate really scorched me, as, at Mrs. Churchman's bidding, I sat down on the hearth.

"Where is Cecilia?" said the deep-toned voice addressing the drab-coloured lady.

"Cecilia!" that sounded promising. Cecilia might be Miss Churchman, or she might be Mrs. Churchman's maid. There had been olive-branches in the house of Churchman, I knew; but I fancied they were all married and settled, and were multiplying olive-branches of their own. Still, there might be one blossom yet unexpanded on the parent stem.

Before Mrs. Churchman, who was slow of speech and hesitating, could reply, the door opened with a burst, and in came a whirlwind in the shape of a young lady in drab attire, relieved with scarlet ribbons—a young lady with rosy cheeks, and large, dark, dewy eyes, and beautiful raven hair, neatly braided and turned up behind *à la* Victoria, as the fashion then was,—a young lady who advanced upon me like a tornado, upsetting on her way a drab music stool, and whisking on to the ground a drab table-cloth, and seriously discomposing the set fold of the drab window-curtains.

"My daughter," began Mr. Churchman. But Cecilia dashed up to me, and exclaimed, "I am so glad you are come. You are Margaret Torrington, of course. Come upstairs and take off your bonnet."

And upstairs I went, and was very kindly attended to, and then I had supper, and then we had prayers, and afterwards I was thankful to be permitted to go to bed, Cecilia assuring me the last thing that we would have "a jolly good talk in the morning, and swear eternal friendship before I went away!"

CHAPTER XV.

THE END OF THE JOURNEY.

When Cecilia was gone, I looked from my window to see what I could see: it was the first time in my life, within the limits of remembrance, that I had not gazed forth on the wide expanse of sea, and sky, and cloud; and I felt somewhat curious to know what a thoroughly inland prospect could be like; and, being on so high a hill, I almost persuaded myself that I should be able to discern afar off something which might be the glimmering sea-line!

But, lo! there lay at my feet—positively at my feet—so close that I fancied I could jump into the midst of its chimney-tops, and red-tiled roofs, the ancient city of Bristol! Yes; there it lay in a hole, just under the steep hill on whose eyrie-like heights was perched the domicile of the Rev. Mr. Churchman. I could see the lamps in a certain square, that in the dim, uncertain light looked not a little like a vault in some huge catacomb; and even the streets of the sleeping city showed drearily enough in the solemn starlight that had succeeded to the murky gloom of the day and of the evening. And when at last I lay down, and, despite my sadness, and the stranger feeling of being in quite unknown latitudes, fell fast asleep, and luxuriated in the sweet, sound slumbers of youth and health, I dreamed of driving through those dark, tomb-like streets and squares in the stage-coach which had brought me from St. Eldred's, and being everywhere stopped by flights of stairs such as Cecilia had informed me occurred on the steep hills near at hand, which were the direct footways from the city.

When I awoke it was morning, and the sun was struggling through the blinds; and hastening to the window, as was my custom, I looked down indeed upon the whole city of Bristol, and upon the suburbs and hills beyond. It was a sea of mist on which I gazed, and out of it rose shapeless masses of roof and gable, like hulks of disabled vessels, and far and wide were scattered towers and steeples—the latter

sometimes in little clumps, two or three together—reminding me somewhat of the masts of shipping in St. Eldred's Harbour. I had scarcely dressed when Cecilia tapped at my door. She came in blooming like a rose, and her raven hair, which she had made a pretence of smoothing into braids, as I had seen it the night before, was allowed to curl a little, as if it were rebellious, and must be humoured to a certain point, and it was confined with a cherry-coloured ribbon. Till she came in and brightened up the room with her radiant bloom and gay-tinted snood, I had not noticed how very ugly it looked in all its uniformity of neutral tint.

"You are rested, I am sure," said Cecilia, as she seated herself on a square drab ottoman in the recess formed by the wide, drab-curtained window. "I am so sorry you are going on to-day. I wish there would come an earthquake and make a chasm in the Westonbury-road, or, I wish an avalanche would come down from the Wick-Leigh Hills, and make the coach-way impassable for a week to come. You cannot think how dreadfully dull I am here—both my sisters married, and my brothers dispersed about the habitable globe! You see, papa and mamma are very good, and I am not good, and that makes me feel differently about things, I suppose. And yet, do you know, I sometimes fancy I am not altogether wrong, Miss Torrington. If God had never made any flowers now, and if He had made the sky, and the sunset clouds, and the grass, and the hills, all drab or slate-colour, *then* I might have believed that neutral tints and religion were inseparably connected. I am sure I don't want to be irreligious—I think an irreligious woman is a dreadful creature; but I cannot, and I never shall, feel that I am a more miserable sinner than other people because I like rose colour, and emerald green, and violet shades, and even amber and deep crimson, if suitably relieved or contrasted. How do you like the bit of *cerise* in my hair? I do buy a bit of bright ribbon now and then; for I have money of my own, that my grandmother left me."

I was so surprised at this long exordium that I hesitated to reply. Miss Churchman hastened to express a hope that

I did not love dowdiness, or think it good to abjure prettiness. "I'll never trust a face again," she continued, impulsively, "if you are not a girl after my own heart. How gloriously your hair curls! they never *could* get that straight. I love light, and colour, and beauty;—oh! if I had only a house of my own, what a fairy palace I would make it! Tell me, you don't think pink is a worldly colour; do you?"

"A worldly colour!" I said, quite bewildered with her rapid speech, her energetic tone, and these entirely new ideas. It had never occurred to me that one colour might be more pious than another. I replied, "No; I should think it is a good colour, since God has made so many roses."

"What a charming notion! the very argument I wanted And really there are no drab flowers; even heliotrope and mignonette have clear, decided hues of their own. Of course, I do not wish to be dressed entirely in pink, or green, or any other colour; but I should like pink ribbons on my bonnet, and a rose-coloured sash. I dare say you think me very silly; but I do like pretty, delicate colours, and I cannot help it."

"And may you not have pink ribbons on your bonnet or in your border?"

"No. The set we belong to have voted pink a sinful colour. It is a part of our religion to wear neutral tints, and to refrain from any adornment of our houses. I might as well have been a Quaker. Mamma is shocked at me because I will have a little bit of rose or scarlet this dreary weather; she says, if I cannot be content with sober, Christian colours, I may wear dark blue, which it seems is not *quite* unorthodox in a young person. But blue does not suit me, so mamma and I have little battles; of course, you know she is not my own mamma."

I was really very glad to hear it; for to me, who had lost so recently the precious relationship of daughter, it seemed well-nigh sacrilegious so to speak of one's mother, even were she arbitrary and unwise. I replied that I had not known it.

"What a wretch you must have thought me!" exclaimed Cecilia. "No; my own mamma was a darling, and she loved everything that was sweet and beautiful. She died when I was quite a little child; but I remember her very well,—a graceful delicate creature, with soft, dark curls and gazelle-like eyes; and she generally wore white dresses; and I remember that she often had flowers in her hair. She gradually faded away, and there came a dreadful time when people told me I had no mamma,—a time when the house was dark, and I had a black frock, and papa was shut up in his study, and no one dared to go and speak to him. Then, in a little while—it seemed but a few days to me, though it was really a whole year—this drab mamma came; and the drawing-room curtains, that used to be of the loveliest blue, were put away, and drab furniture, and carpets, and dresses became the order of the day. We have gone on in our drabness ever since; but I never could be moulded into the proper, highly-satisfactory little girl my new mamma expected to make me."

I sympathized most heartily with Cecilia Churchman, and we occupied ourselves for some minutes in making a furious onslaught upon step-mothers in general, and upon hers in particular. It never struck me that I was acting injudiciously, not to say dishonourably, in thus encouraging the young lady in a prejudice which, well founded or otherwise, could not fail to be the source of much unhappiness, perhaps of much real evil. I had not learnt then a truth of some importance —that there are two sides to every quarrel; and "*Audi alteram partem*" was a suggestion I should certainly have repudiated had I thought about it at all. Had I possessed a little more discretion, I should certainly have paused before I joined Cecilia Churchman in the tirade against step-mothers, in which, as I found afterwards, she was continually indulging.

I went downstairs feeling a strong antipathy to the class my hostess represented, and regarding her with something like abhorrence. And my aversion was not diminished when she grimly bade us good morning, and looked with

evident disapprobation at Cecilia's rose-coloured ribbon, which really became her to admiration.

We had prayers, of course, first; very long and wordy prayers they seemed to me, after the simple, earnest service to which I had been accustomed in my own home, and I was glad when they were over; for I wanted my breakfast, and an appetising odour of coffee and frizzled ham was slowly diffusing itself through the house. The repast which ensued was taken with gravity, and nearly in silence; and when it was concluded, Mr. Churchman, to my infinite horror and amazement, signified his desire to speak with me alone in the sacred precincts of the library; while, at the same time, Mrs. Churchman reminded Cecilia that she had many letters to write and circulars to send out, in her capacity of Honorary Secretary to the New Zealand Female Clothing Society.

"I am not their secretary, mamma!" I heard the young lady saying, as tremblingly I followed the Roman nose and the spectacles into the sanctum whither I was invited. "You said, 'I would be happy to undertake the office;' but it was not true,—I should be very unhappy in such a position. Besides, I hate all societies and committees, and I think secretaries and treasurers are all moonshine, and—"

Here I lost the sense of what she was saying, and the next minute the door of the library closed upon me, and I was requested to sit down and listen to a few words of advice. As I heard them then, those words of counsel seemed to be stupid, drawling, and hypocritical in the extreme; as I think upon them now, they assume quite another aspect. Mr. Churchman was a harsh, morose man, taking jaundiced views of life, and investing religion with a gloom and mystery, that ought rather to have been applied to his own peculiar dogmas, which were dismal enough, I must confess; but he was a conscientious man, and that which he spoke he believed without reserve. It is quite a mistake to suppose that men who affect a certain solemn exterior, and speak in set, slow phrases, and discourse on sacred subjects with an unction all their own, are necessarily hypocrites. Sancti-

moniousness is oftentimes an evil habit, and a very disagreeable habit, too; but it is not always a cloak of treachery and dissembling; though, if people will wear the wolf's coat, they can scarcely complain of being classed with that unpopular quadruped. Now, looking back upon that half-hour in Mr. Churchman's library, I feel sure that he was perfectly sincere, though prosy and narrow-minded in his views.

I cannot fully go into the discourse with which he favoured me; some of it was good enough, and tantamount to what I had really heard before, only more gracefully put and more simply rendered; but the greater part of Mr. Churchman's private sermon consisted of warnings against nearly everything and everybody that I might encounter. But especially was I cautioned against Romanism; for that was Mr. Churchman's strong point, and he was grand at getting up demonstration meetings, and making tremendous speeches compounded of Scripture denunciations against Babylon, and very powerful phrases of his own.

Mr. Churchman concluded his long address by presenting me with two little volumes of which he was the author. One was entitled, "The Woman on the Seven Hills," and it was such a dreadful hash of the histories and iniquities of Pagan and Papal Rome, that to this day I cannot understand many of its pages. I gathered, however, that new volcanoes were to burst out and bury it, like Pompeii and Herculaneum of yore; and I devoutly hoped that this might not happen till with my bodily eyes I had seen St. Peter's and the Coliseum, and all those other "grey ruins of an ancient world,"—for a journey to Rome had been the acme of my desires for several years past. The second book was gaily bound, and entitled "Stories of Convent Life; or, Behind the Scenes."

With these additions to my little library I prepared to leave the drab-coloured mansion, and Cecilia accompanied me to the coach-office, talking enthusiastically all the way, and declaring that I was a girl after her own heart,—one of her own sort,—and she never regretted anything so much as this abrupt termination of our intercourse, which was not, of course, to interfere with our friendship. For my part, I was

completely conquered; a girl of fifteen always feels infinitely flattered at proposals of intimacy from a girl several years older than herself; and being deferred to, and made much of, and treated confidentially, suited me exactly. My carpet-bag was carried into the city by a solemn-looking serving-man, and we ourselves tramped down the "stone stairs," as I called them, talking zealously all the while.

Very unwillingly, at last, and with many embraces and protestations of affection, my new friend and I parted, and once more, as the coach rolled on its way along Stokes-Croft, and as I looked back on the hill on the summit of which I had reposed all night, I felt desolate and alone, and I envied Cecilia the home she so thoroughly failed to appreciate. At length came Westonbury and the train, and I took my seat in a second-class carriage with mingled sensations of dread and pleasurable excitement.

The guard slammed the door, the engine yelled as only engines can yell, and we were on our way; and before I thought I had thoroughly settled myself in my corner, the carriages were slackening speed, and some one, on a dreary sort of covered platform, was shouting something that might be construed into "Cotswoldbury;" it sounded very much like "Cotsalbry!"

Yes! it was Cotswoldbury; and, looking out, I expected to behold some evidences of its superiority to other places, and was quite confounded at the dreary, dingy station that met my view. But I had no time for discursive reflections, for there I was among porters and passengers in a busy little crowd, the dusk already gathering about us, and the lamps dimly burning, and making the said dusk visible, and I knew no more what I was to do, or which way I was to go, than if I had gone up in a balloon, and alighted in another planet.

"Any luggage, miss?" inquired the guard.

"Oh, yes!" I shrieked, suddenly alive to the danger of my properties being carried on to Blackingham, the ultimate destination of the train.

"Why couldn't you say so before?" grumbled the

aggrieved functionary. "Time's just up. Make haste and show me which is yours. What's the name?"

By dint of the exertions of sundry porters and my own directions and descriptions of packages, my trunks were at length extricated from the vast heap which the tarpaulin covered, and were hauled on to the upper platform, whither I followed them, wondering now all tremblingly what *was* to become of me! Having counted my bags and boxes, I began to ponder as to what I should do: already I was left alone with the railway officials, my fellow-travellers having disappeared, and people began to eye me rather curiously, as I stood helplessly by my luggage. Oh, if Cecilia were only with me! What a waif and stray I felt myself to be, thus stranded on the great world's desolate shore! Surely I had suffered shipwreck at the very outset of my voyage. Oh, how I longed for the little land-locked bay once more!

I was roused from a sort of reverie, into which, for a moment's space, I had fallen,—a fleeting dream of olden days, of the childhood that now seemed so remote, and of Gilbert, and of the *Little Gipsy*, dancing on the shallow waters of the creek,—I was roused by the station-master asking me where I wished to go. I looked round into the foggy evening, and, feeling wearied and utterly wretched, I burst into tears; and it was some minutes before I could explain that I was bound for Mr. Crofton's house, and that I had expected, or, rather, hoped, that some one would come to meet me.

"Going to service there—eh?" said the station-master, kindly enough, but abruptly.

I recoiled with horror: surely I did not *look* like a servant,—I, Margaret Torrington, late of Kelver House! With some natural indignation, I replied, haughtily enough, "No; I am Mr. Crofton's niece."

"Beg pardon," said the man instantly; "but I did not mean a common servant: I thought, perhaps, you were to be nursery governess, or something of that sort; and I thought as they did not come or send the carriage for you, that you could not be any kin, or a visitor. But I'll get a fly for

you, miss, and you'll be at Crofton Lawn in less than no time."

The fly came up, and the necessary directions were given; and I threw myself back on the seat, feeling more miserable and isolated than ever. I never looked out, or thought about the road, till we rode through a handsome gateway, and past a lodge, and I knew that at last I must be at home! But, oh! what a home. What a mockery of the word it seemed to call that stately mansion *home!* And would there be a welcome for me? Would there be any kindly glance, or any gentle tones? As I mused thus, the vehicle drew up before the great hall-door, and the driver pulled the bell vigorously, and handed me out, as if I had been a lady of high degree arriving in her own chariot. I felt as if I had no business to make all that bustle, and my heart died within me when a tall footman opened the door with a flourish, and, beholding the humble fly, looked round with an air which seemed to say,—"What's all this disturbance about? I thought it was somebody of consequence."

Feeling like an atom that was dissevered from creation generally, I walked up those imposing steps, and stood before the superb footman, and inquired if Mr. Crofton were at home.

CHAPTER XVI.

GUSSIE.

I WAS shown into a spacious room, lined with books on all sides and from floor to ceiling. The shelves and book-cases were of polished oak, the furniture was oaken also, a splendid Turkey carpet lay on the floor, and ample ruby-coloured curtains shut out the dreary night. A capacious velvet chair stood on the hearth, and looked invitingly comfortable to a way-worn, heart-sick traveller; but I had not the presumption to fling myself back in its luxurious depths. I knew better than to seat myself on the extremest edge even of such a throne, which, I intuitively divined to be my

Uncle Crofton's chair of state, and altogether special property.

I had plenty of time to look about me and note the evidences of wealth which surrounded me on every side, for minute after minute passed away, and I was still left in solitude. I began to feel painfully nervous, and with every tick of the antique clock above the mantel-piece my sense of forlornness and my miserable depression increased. Was this tardy welcome an earnest of what I was to expect as an inmate of my uncle's house? Why had he not sent a servant to meet me at the station? Why did he not come now and set my throbbing heart at rest with at least one kindly pressure of the hand and a word or two of welcome? Where was my aunt, who, after all, would be the person of most consequence as far as my comfort was concerned? and had any one told her that I had arrived? These and a hundred other questions I asked myself as I listened to the noises of the house,—the ringing of bells, the going to and fro of footsteps, all subdued to dream-like sounds by distance and double doors, and yet most audible to my sensitive ears as I listened painfully for some tokens of approach.

I grew sick with apprehension and nervousness; but at last, when nearly half an hour had passed, and a strange feeling was stealing over me, half drowsiness, half faintness, I heard a great clamour in the passage through which I had reached the library. I heard a door bang twice, I heard a tramp of feet, I heard shrill voices, and certainly I heard a scuffle very close at hand. Then, with a wild burst as of autumn winds, the door flew open, and in extreme trepidation I rose to my feet.

Of course, it was not my uncle or my Aunt Louisa who entered like a hurricane; it was a couple of small people, very handsomely dressed, and apparently in a state of feud with each other,—a fine boy of seven and a girl perhaps two years older. I came to the conclusion that they were my cousins, as I knew my Uncle Crofton rejoiced in a very numerous family, varying in age from twenty or thereabouts to three years and six months.

The children came and stood opposite me, and gazed steadily and unblenchingly into my face till I felt it incumbent on me to speak. Accordingly I asked in the condescending tone an elder naturally uses to strange boys and girls whose proper habitat is the nursery, "Will you tell me your name?"

I had addressed the young lady, but she made no answer, and only stared the harder; and yet she did not look very shy, I thought. I began to feel very hot and uncomfortable as the staring went on, and no notice was taken of my little speech.

At length the boy burst out, "Who are you?"

I replied that I was Margaret Torrington.

"You are the girl that was to come,—the doctor's girl that mamma told us about? I hope you are going to behave well."

"I will try to do so," I replied, crushing down the angry pride that was threatening to have its way.

The boy went on:—"There are thirteen of us, and Tom's the eldest, and Sibyl is the next. Sibyl's a stunner, she is! and she makes us all mind her. Even mamma minds her, though she doesn't mind papa. And I'm Cuddie,—my real name's Cuthbert; and I think I shall make you call me Master Cuthbert,—nurse won't. And this is Gussie, and her real name is Augusta, and she will nip pieces out of your neck and arms if you put her monkey up."

I dare say I looked my astonishment. I had never heard a child talk in such unchildlike fashion before; and no one will be surprised to learn that the impressions I received of my young cousins' character and early training were the reverse of favourable.

"How stupid you do look!" quoth Master Cuthbert, as I returned no answer to his last piece of information. "My! won't she nip you, and pull all those curls about, when you are dressing her, and giving her her music lessons. And ma says she is to be washed in cold water all this winter, and you'll have to do it. I wouldn't be in your place, for if you make her clean she will serve you out; and if you don't, ma will give it you."

All this time the young lady was contemplating me steadily and curiously. She was a thin, ugly child, yellow-skinned, large-nosed, wide-mouthed, and afflicted with frightful teeth. Her black hair was coarse and lustreless, and, refusing to curl, hung in long plaits, tied up with scarlet ribbons, about her neck and shoulders. My heart misgave me as I saw those elaborated plaits; for, if Miss Gussie's toilet was to be my charge, the hair-dressing, as well as the cold ablutions, would probably fall to my share of duties. It was anything but an enlivening prospect. Presently she began to dance round me like a wicked elf, catching at my cloak and at my bonnet-strings, and finally at my curls, to my extreme annoyance and no small inconvenience. Still she did not speak, but the expression of her cunning grey eyes was almost as eloquent as words. At last, being tired of her performance, she sat down on the hearthrug, and dragged out an unlucky little cat, who was sleeping under the velvet chair, and tormented it till it mewed most piteously. I longed to snatch it from her grasp, but scarcely dared to place myself in antagonism with her at so early a stage of our acquaintance. Cuddie held poor pussy's tail in both his hands; Gussie gripped the ears, and in that position they held the wretched quadruped aloft, and swung her furiously to and fro. The boy looked all the while saucy, defiant, and brimful of tricks and mischief; the girl looked spiteful, cruel, mean, and treacherous. Just as my patience had quite evaporated, just as I was going to spring forward, and rescue by force of arms the poor tortured animal from her persecutors,—at the risk, of course, of being scratched both by cat and children,—the door opened a second time, and a respectable woman of middle age came in.

Cuddie dropped the cat, who, being held now only by the ears, could use her hind legs, wherewith she tore away so vigorously that Miss Gussie was forced to let her go, after a vicious tweak, that elicited an awful howl or mowl, and a deep scratch on Gussie's arm by way of retaliation. I was really far from sorry when I saw the blood, and heard Gussie's sharp scream of mingled pain and passion.

"You tiresome children now," said nurse, as she hurriedly bound up Augusta's arm with her pocket-handkerchief; "I'm ashamed of you coming in here, and worrying the cat, and this young lady, too, after her journey. Dear me! Miss Gussie, you're nine years old nearly, and it's time you began to behave yourself pretty. You must keep it on, I say, miss;" for Gussie was behaving like a wild cat herself, and trying with all her might to tear off the bandage nurse had fastened on. "There now; you've got the blood on your beautiful new frock, and you can't go in to dessert. It's a pretty deep scratch, though, but you deserved it; if you had been scratched all over I should not have cared, for it's downright sinful to torment the dumb creatures that can't complain. You will go in to dessert, you say? Well, I suppose you will; so come along, and have another frock on, and I'll give you some long gloves to hide the scratch. There never were such children. Perhaps, miss," addressing me, "you'll come too, for there's a dinner party going on, and neither master or missis will be out of the dining-room this hour, and you must want to take off your bonnet and have some tea."

Very thankfully I caught up the idea;—I had lunched early and very sparingly at Mrs. Churchman's, and now I was really faint from want of food. I followed nurse and the children, and we crossed a broad hall, and went up many stairs, till we reached a suite of apartments at the very top of the house, where nurse seemed very much at home.

Gussie was a little subdued, I could see; her arm pained her, and she was terribly afraid she might be called down to dessert before she could be robed afresh, and before the wound ceased bleeding. A young woman, named Rebecca, at nurse's bidding, changed Gussie's frock, and touched up Master Cuddie's toilet, which had been generally deranged by his rolling on the floor. Meanwhile, nurse said, "You would like to go to your room, miss?"

I intimated that I would be very thankful to go there; so, while Rebecca was struggling with the refractory Gussie, who objected to the frock nurse had put out for her, I was

conducted to my room. To my surprise it was on the same floor as the nursery, and very close at hand; it was a large, whitewashed attic, neatly but scantily furnished, and to my horror, it contained two beds.

"Who is to sleep here?" I asked of nurse, with a wretched presentiment of the answer I should receive.

"Miss Gussie will sleep in this little bed, Miss Torrington. You see, miss, she's too big for the nursery, and altogether beyond my hand. I can manage Master Cuddie and Miss Baby when *she* is away; but the nursery is a sort of Bedlam and wild-beast place when she is in it. I never saw such a child! I do believe she's possessed with an evil spirit: no child's spirit could prompt her to the things *she* says and does;—she makes my flesh creep often. Then Miss Hollingsworth, the governess, will *not* have her in the school-room; she says she will give up her situation at once if Miss Gussie comes there;—the elder ones are bad enough, but it would be ten times worse with Miss Gussie among them. And Miss Hollingsworth is very clever, and brings the young ladies on, and Miss Sibyl won't hear of her going away. So you see, when Mr. Crofton comes back from your parts, and says you are a-coming, Missis settles it at once—she says you must have Gussie all to yourself—you must manage her and teach her till she is ready for the school-room. But if you can tame our Miss Gussie, Miss Torrington, I shall say you are the cleverest person I ever met with, and you are fit to tame the tigers and the leopards, and as good as Van Amburgh himself. Bless you! she's like an eel—she's so slippery and writhing; and like a tigress with her nails and teeth; and like a snake with her cunningness; so that there's no getting hold of her one way nor another. It's of no use to scold her—she only grins at you awful, just like the great monkeys in the Zoological Gardens; you can't punish her, for she won't be punished; and as for coaxing her and trying gentle ways, you might just as well think to coax the wind when it's unroofing your house, or to ask the spring-tides to go back when they are half way in. I don't believe there's such another child in England!"

I sat down dismayed! What could I do with this little termagant? Should I conquer her by force of words or deeds, or should I fail to conquer her at all? And to have her in my room, never to be free from her, to have her by night as well as by day! Well! if the worst came to the worst, I could run away; and I wondered whether the Churchmans would take me in. How inviting appeared to me now their drab-coloured rooms! Neutral tints and monotony seemed charming compared with the future of storm and unrest which was slowly unfolding itself before me.

Nurse left me a little while alone in my room. Oh! if only its low ceiling and white walls, its curtainless bed and tiny looking-glass, had been all my own; if only that dreary, chilly attic had been a refuge whither I might retreat when the worries of the day were past, finding there some consolation in its solitude and silence. But there would be the formidable Gussie in the smaller bed; and I felt sure she would wake me up always at unseasonable hours, and that if I looked round at any time before the candle was extinguished I should see those cold grey eyes watching my every movement. I should never have the comfort of being quite alone. When I returned to the nursery, I found a good tea spread, and Cuddie and Gussie absent; and, though my pride received a terrible blow at taking my first meal in the house thus, with an upper servant and without a word of greeting from any of my relations, I was glad enough to drink the nice hot tea nurse poured out for me; and the buttered toast and the new-laid egg were thoroughly enjoyable. And now, having rested and made a toilet, and having eaten and drunken, I began to feel myself again, and more able to cope with Gussie when occasion should require; only I was nervous at the idea of seeing my Aunt Louisa and my Cousin Sibyl.

Presently Gussie and Cuddie came back, and the latter, after a slight altercation and some bribing in the shape of gingerbread, was put to bed.

"Shall I, or will you, see to Miss Gussie?" asked nurse, when she returned from tucking her little rebel in.

was torn, I had the satisfaction of seeing her laid between the sheets in the proper and legitimate fashion.

But my triumph was of short duration; directly she was free she sprang up and assailed me furiously, gibbering away in her passion like an insane creature, and "nipping" at my arms, as Cuddie had told me she would if I at all displeased her. Now, I was not used to being beaten and *nipped*, and I had a spirit as high as was ever possessed by any girl of fifteen and three months, and it was effectually roused now. One "nip" was considerably sharper than the rest; in fact, the sudden pain forced from me an involuntary scream, and, without a moment's thought, I seized Miss Gussie with the very arm she had just attacked, and with the other gave her a thorough good beating. For a moment all was still; she was trying to bite me, but she did not try to return my chastisement, neither did she make any noise. But, as I presently found, she was breathless with rage, and when I laid her down again, and said, "There, you naughty girl, that is how I serve children who pinch and bite," she set up a succession of such piercing screams that in self-defence I put my hands to my ears; I had never heard anything so dreadful, so unearthly! I can only compare the sounds she made to the yelling of a railway engine when it is approaching some station through which it is about to pass at express speed!

"Hush, hush!" I cried, as each successive shriek rose higher and was more prolonged; "you will rouse the house!" —which was precisely what she wished to do, and what to some extent she succeeded in doing pretty quickly. I soon heard doors open and shut, and footsteps in the passage, and then nurse came in with a light, and discovered us both pale with passion, and torn and tumbled with the conflict that had raged! My nightcap was off—we did not wear nets in those days—there was a rent in the sleeve of my night-dress, and my arm was bleeding from the very effective "nip" I had sustained. Gussie's grey eyes were gleaming with fury, her lank hair hung all about her shoulders, and her ears and arms were as red as her face was white with the punishment I had inflicted. "She's beaten me!" shrieked Gussie,

rocking herself on the pillow; "oh, I'll tell mamma! She won't have any of us beaten by a beggarly cousin that's too poor to pay for her board and education."

That sentence stung me to the quick, for I knew the child must have heard it from her mother or her elder sisters; she was only repeating like a parrot the cruel words she had caught up.

"Indeed," said nurse, "I'm afraid there'll be a fuss, Miss Torrington. Missis won't have one of them touched; the last under-nurse was turned away because she hit Miss Gussie one day when mortal flesh and blood could bear no more."

I thought I should not care if I were turned away—at least I could go out to service, and it seemed to service I was doomed at Crofton Lawn. But I was sorry this fracas had arisen at the very outset of my residence in the family, and before I had seen my aunt. However, I drew up my dilapidated sleeve and pointed to my arm, now purple and swelled, and bearing most visibly the marks of Gussie's nails.

"Laws, miss!" said Rebecca significantly, "we all have to put up with that; only Miss Hollingsworth won't have it, and so Miss Gussie's turned out of the school-room. I am sure I never see such a limb; sometimes I don't believe she is made of the same stuff as other children—leastways, she has got a wicked spirit in her."

I thought she had, and, order being now restored, I went back to my bed, but not to sleep, though Gussie followed nurse and Rebecca to their quarters, declaring she would not stop with me because I clawed and beat her. Oh, how wretched were my meditations as slowly the cold grey dawn stole in, and revealed, in all their bareness and meanness, the walls and scanty furniture of the room! But what mattered unpolished chairs and tables, ugly whitewashed walls, and carpetless floors? I had not been bred luxuriously, and I was young and healthy, and I could have been happy in my out-of-the-way garret if only it had been all my own—if only I might have hoped for justice and common kindness, for a little sympathy sometimes, and for some amount of consideration in the family circle.

Intuitively I felt that I need not anticipate any such good fortune, and I felt that at the very outset of my career I had unhappily distinguished myself in a way that would scarcely commend me to the general favour. Nurse did not conceal from me that "I was in a scrape." She didn't wonder, she said; but I *must* learn to keep my hands off them"—meaning Cuddie and Augusta.

About ten o'clock I received a summons to the breakfast-room. My aunt and uncle were there, I learned, ready to receive me, and I followed the messenger with trembling limbs and a heart beating high with excitement, dread, and indignation. Was this the way people commonly received their orphan nieces?

CHAPTER XVII.

MY SECOND BREAKFAST.

USHERED into the breakfast-room by the same tall footman who had opened the door for me the evening before, I discovered my uncle seated at table, discussing with much apparent gusto the contents of a savoury pie. He scarcely raised his eyes as I entered, and signified his recognition of my presence by a grunt, which might equally have been addressed to the morsel of grouse on which he was intent and to myself. Opposite to him, but with her face turned away and her knees over the fender, sat a lady, large, and fair, and peevish-looking. She wore a loose morning robe or dressing-gown, and her still abundant hair was fastened up under an elaborate morning-cap; her hands were remarkably well shaped and very white—a fact, as I afterwards discovered, which she always bore in mind; and just then they were engaged in holding a beautiful porcelain coffee-cup, and in stirring the contents thereof. Presiding over the urn and the breakfast equipage generally, sat an elegant girl, with long auburn hair, lovely blue eyes, and an exquisite complexion; but the beauteous face, that in itself was so attractive, showed a dissatisfied, querulous expres-

sion; there was a frown on the smooth brow, the ruby lips were curved, as if in angry scorn, and there was something resolved and imperious in the gesture with which she handled even the cups and saucers. A more uncomfortable-looking trio I never saw!

Nor when the trio became a quartette was its appearance in any way amended; for I felt very ill at ease, and heartily wished that the episode of the early morning had never occurred. My uncle said "Good morning," when he had emptied his mouth, and, laying down his fork, he gave me two fingers, and bade me be seated. My cousin Sibyl—for, of course, it was she whose beauty and whose ill-temper were so apparent—looked at me disdainfully, surveying me from head to foot, and taking no pains to disguise the disapproval in which the scrutiny resulted.

"Oh, by the way!" shouted my uncle, choking over a large piece of pie-crust, "I quite forgot! You don't know your aunt, Margaret. That is Mrs. Crofton, your aunt Louisa, who is so good as to receive you for the present into the bosom of her family."

How I blessed him for those three words—"for the present!" and how earnestly I determined to get out of the "bosom" as speedily as possible.

"Of course she knows I am Mrs. Crofton," said the lady with the sleek white hands. Then, turning to me, and giving me the empty cup to carry to the table—"I am afraid you are of a very independent turn of mind, Margaret, and that will not suit me; also, I am afraid your temper is very bad, and that will never do with your cousins. I cannot have quarreling and even fighting in my house. Why did you go to bed last night without seeing either your uncle or myself?"

"I was so very tired," I pleaded; "and I had been in the house more than three hours, and no one came, and I thought you were engaged."

"Of course we were engaged; but we knew you had arrived, and quite expected to see you later in the evening. Why did you not go to Miss Hollingsworth? Your cousins

in the school-room were surprised at not seeing you there. I do not approve of your being familiar with the servants. You had your tea in the nursery, I am told."

I was silent; but I could have said, "Why then did not Miss Hollingsworth or her pupils seek me, a stranger in the house? Of course, it was not in the fitness of things that I should take tea in the nursery; but I was sick and fainting for want of due refreshment, and nurse was the only person who concerned herself about me. But for her I might have sunk from fatigue and sheer exhaustion, for no one else thought of offering the weary traveller either meat, drink, or welcome."

"In future," continued Mrs. Crofton, "you will take your meals with the other girls in the school-room; and you had better understand at once the footing on which you are here."

I signified my assent; I thought it would be far better at once to know precisely the ground I should occupy in the "bosom of the family."

"Have you breakfasted?" asked my uncle.

I replied that I had. I had consumed coffee, thick bread-and-butter, and frizzled bloater two hours before in company with nurse and Rebecca, the baby, Cuddie, and the amiable Gussie."

"You had better have a cup of coffee now," said Mr. Crofton, pushing away the remains of the game pie, and drawing towards him a couple of eggs and the toast-rack. "Give Margaret a cup of coffee, Sibyl."

Now, my first impulse was bashfully to say, "No, thank you;" but something told me that it would not do to be too meek in that house. If I were invited to take coffee, why should I not? Its aroma was most fragrant; it was two hours since I had breakfasted; I was feeling cold and embarrassed; doubtless a cup of delicious, warm coffee would brace me up for what remained to be encountered. It struck me all at once, that if I consented to be a nobody now, a nobody I should remain to the end of the chapter; and, if you are aboundingly humble, you may be pretty sure that the world at large will take you at

your own valuation. So, having briefly reconsidered my hasty decision, I modified it by saying, "Thank you," and omitting the negation. Sibyl looked at me in sheer amaze, and I could see that my aunt immediately pronounced me guilty of reprehensible presumption. But I tried to look unconcerned, and sat still on my chair, gazing into the fire, till Sibyl had poured out my coffee, which she pushed towards me without a word or glance. I rose and took it gracefully, and thanked her with all the self-possession I could muster; then I trifled with my spoon, stirred up my coffee, tasted it, and finally begged for another lump of sugar. Sibyl looked very hard at me as she dropped the sugar into my cup; she did not speak, but I knew she longed to say, "Was there ever such a piece of impudence before? Oh, you cool, insufferable girl!" And I knew, also, that she would say it, and much more of the same kind, when she and I were better acquainted. As for my aunt, she sat aghast, staring at me with a troubled countenance; as she said afterwards to her husband, "There would be no bringing that girl *under;* she had effrontery enough to face the whole town of Cotswoldbury." And yet I had only taken a cup of coffee that was offered to me by the master of the house; and I had courteously requested another lump of sugar! Whereas I ought not to have had the daring to say "Yes," on being pressed; I ought to have taken the cup awkwardly and shyly, and have been content with it, nor ventured to find fault, even if it were not sweetened in the least.

But my aunt soon recovered herself, and Sibyl, leaning her pretty chin upon her rosy little palm, stared *nonchalantly* in my face. I sipped my coffee, as I hoped, quite naturally, and as I did so felt that it was stimulating my nerves most charmingly; the storm was coming, rising heavily and fast, but it would not beat on my head altogether with impunity. I was prepared to hold my own; only I hoped I should not lose my temper; for I knew right well, that he or she, who in a combat of any kind preserves composure and speaks rationally, is almost sure to be the victor.

Mrs. Crofton cleared her throat, shifted her feet, and stroked complacently the left hand with the right. "Margaret," she said sternly, "do you know how you are left?"

"How I am left?" I answered dubiously.

"Yes. Have the goodness not to repeat my words; your doing so proves you to be at once stupid and ill-bred. Do you know how much money you have, and what is your actual position?"

A flood of sudden anguish filled my heart, and rose even to my quivering lips; but I knew it was vain to weep and bemoan my hard fate in that presence. With an almost superhuman effort I drove back those surging waves of agony; I kept down the sobs that verged upon hysteria; I would not let the burning tears have way; but every pulse throbbed, and my voice sounded unfamiliar and hollow as I answered quietly and even proudly, "I know that I have the inexpressible misfortune to be an orphan—a more desolate position cannot be conceived. My father left me all he could. I am mistress of about £400. I have little else that I can call my own."

"I have told you before," interposed my uncle, "that £400 will not support you and educate you. The long and the short of it is, that you are here, and your best plan will be to make yourself as useful and as agreeable to your aunt and cousins as you can. I will not touch your £400; while you are in my house you will have board and lodging free of cost; and clothes, of course; also, you will share in such studies as your aunt thinks fit."

"Uncle," I said—still quietly, still with strong hand forcing back the passionate thoughts that were surging to the surface—"I thank you sincerely for your goodness to your half-sister's child; but I think I am old enough to have some choice of my own. A life of dependency will never suit me. I am not a careless, headstrong girl; I was a mere child a year ago, now I am a woman grown—not in years I know," for I saw the sneer of Sibyl's fair young face. "I know, uncle, that girls of my age are

generally and properly accounted children; but trouble and loss have swept away the remnant of my childhood, and I think my girlhood with it. I feel as a woman, I hope and fear as a woman, and I am prepared to act as a woman."

"The first lesson a woman should learn is *submission*," returned my uncle, gravely; "but if you had this choice of your own, what would you select, what course would you prefer to follow?"

"That is a question, sir, I cannot answer on the spur of the moment. I am young, I am healthy, I am proud, and I believe I am *not* stupid! I desire to work for my livelihood—to *earn* that which I eat, and drink, and wear—to *pay* for shelter, for everything I may require."

"Ungrateful minx!" ejaculated Mrs. Crofton; while Sibyl looked upon me with the mingled astonishment and disgust wherewith she might have contemplated some very rare and marvellous, but loathsome creature, exposed for public exhibition.

"What sort of work would you propose to do?" growled my uncle. "I explained to you that your music, in its present rudimentary state, was of no use to you: you confess that your education is in a very imperfect condition, that your studies have been for the most part of a desultory nature; and then, who would employ a girl of your age as governess, even if we permitted you to disgrace yourself and us by taking what is called a situation?"

"I have thought of a plan, uncle! Give me half of my £400, and I will spend it in perfecting my education. I will find, or some one will find for me, a thoroughly good school, where for £150 I may obtain board and good instruction, with the benefit of masters, for two years. The other £50 I shall need for clothes and incidental expenses. At the end of two years I shall be more than seventeen; I shall have £200 in the bank to fall upon in case of sickness or urgent need, and I shall be in a position to gain an honest and a respectable living by honest and respectable labour. Is not this plan a good one, uncle?"

"I do not know; I must think—I must consult your aunt. My dear, what do you think?"

"I think that your niece is a most ungrateful, low-minded, impertinent young woman! I think that you ought to exercise over her all proper authority. If you let her break away from all restraint, as she proposes to do, she will probably go upon the stage, or become a village schoolmistress, or make herself notorious, to our shame and confusion of face."

"Aunt! Mrs. Crofton! I will never avow the relationship. No one shall ever know through me that my dear mother was once called Maggie Crofton. I think I can keep my head above water, and I trust I never shall disgrace the grand old name of Torrington: but if I should sink below the ordinary level, be sure that no extremity could force from me the confession of my kindred with your family."

My aunt gasped for breath; words could not express her indignation and her anger. As for Sibyl, her fingers ached to beat me. She and Gussie were own sisters, though the one was fair as fair could be, and the other ugly almost to the last extent of juvenile ugliness.

"Oh!" said Mrs. Crofton mournfully, shaking her head at her husband—"Oh, my dear, what a serpent you have taken into the bosom of your family!"

My courage was gradually sinking; I should have liked another cup of strong coffee, but I had not the hardihood to ask for it—nay, I believe Sibyl would have scorned to give it to me had I requested it. A very little more, and I felt that I should burst into tears, and be able to cope with them no more. Oh! would they let me go away from Cotswoldbury, hateful Cotswoldbury, all shut in by hills that swept the horizon whichever way I looked? Would they let me go now to my own room before my strength utterly should fail me, before I gave way to the nearly irrepressible anguish that was growing keener and stronger every minute?

But there they sat, gazing into my fast blanching face,

and caring little what I suffered. Again my uncle spoke:—"Margaret, this is all nonsense. I will not give up your £400 till you are of age. Of course, you can go to law for it if you choose; but if you do go, I shall throw your affairs at once into Chancery. I am your natural guardian; your mother committed you to my care, and I shall exercise the lawful authority I possess in spite of all the foolish things you say; and, considering all things, I must say you are very ungrateful."

"And I must say," interposed Mrs. Crofton, "that you are very rebellious and impious to dare to dispute your guardian's will. Did not your mother, of her own free will, summon him down to St. Eldred's? Did he not go to her assistance, at his own great inconvenience, and contrary to my advice? Did he not remain at Kelver House to conduct the funeral, to wind up your affairs? Did he not take upon himself the burden of settling everything? Did he not provide for you, in spite of all my warnings, honourable shelter and protection?"

It was of no use. I had struggled till I could struggle no longer. All at once my senses seemed to fail me; I believed that I was indeed an ingrate, an impious, self-willed girl; that my uncle had been most generous, most kind; and that I had repaid him shamefully. I had striven well and perseveringly; but, after all, I was not a full-statured woman, only a poor, weak girl, and my heart failed me, so I fell back upon the usual resource of girls, and cried bitterly and unrestrainedly. Meanwhile there was an awkward silence, and each moment as it passed added to my discomfiture, and diminished my little stock of self-possession.

At length my uncle resumed:—"Dear me! all this is very foolish; what have you to cry about? Your aunt will overlook your hasty remarks, I have no doubt. My dear, she is sorry, you see. I am sure you will forgive the temper she has shown. It was very unbecoming and most uncalled-for, I must confess; but there may, perhaps, be some little excuse. Margaret has been a spoiled and petted child, and

accustomed to her own way, and she has gone through much trouble lately. No doubt she is a little unhinged; but let us hope that in a day or two, when she has settled down in her new home, she will see things in a different light. There, leave off crying, and be reasonable. Let us finish our conversation, and then it will not have to be renewed."

Thus exhorted, I made a mighty effort, and succeeded in wiping away my tears, and presenting an air of composure which was very far from genuine. I could not help sobbing hysterically, and my hands trembled visibly; but I wept no more, and prepared myself to listen attentively. Mrs. Crofton then addressed me:—"Perhaps, after all, this little outburst may do you good. I am quite ready to make every allowance for you; your training has evidently been not of the best kind, and you are naturally excitable and impulsive, and you have not been taught the duty of deferential respect towards your elders and superiors. If you wish to succeed in life, you must know your own place and keep it. You may be very comfortable here if you like; you will have a place in the school-room, and you will have the same advantages as your cousins, who are under Miss Hollingsworth's care. I am sure I hope you will profit to the utmost by her instructions. In return, I only wish you to devote yourself to your little cousin Gussie. She has a peculiar temper, and servants have not patience with her; she unfortunately dislikes Miss Hollingsworth, and cannot endure the school-room. You, therefore, will take care of her; it will be very good for you, and you will gain some experience in teaching and taking charge of children. Gussie will sleep in your room, and you will give her such assistance in dressing as she requires. You will also give her two or three hours in the morning, hearing her read and practise, &c., and one hour in the afternoon you will spend with her, giving her such lessons as Sibyl or I shall arrange. All the rest of your time will be at your own disposal, and I trust you will make diligent use of your opportunities, and improve yourself to the best of your ability. If you choose, you may make yourself very useful

in this house. I should like you to read to me sometimes, and, if you have a voice, you can practise Sibyl's duets with her; only I must have you patient and conciliatory with Gussie."

"Aunt," I said sorrowfully, "I am sure I shall never manage Gussie; I lost all patience with her this morning."

"So I heard, and I was very much shocked to hear of it I cannot have Gussie excited; her nervous system is so peculiar that I have known her to scream till she was perfectly exhausted, when some one has been injudicious enough to oppose her."

"But she uses her nails and her teeth."

"You must not believe all you hear in the nursery. Nurse and Rebecca make the worst of her; she is a very interesting child when properly managed; you must try to understand her, to win her affections. When she gets into her little tantrums, you must try the soothing system; she will not bear opposition or coercion."

I did not say it, but I thought that to win Gussie's affections would be a very difficult, not to say impossible task; but I did ask what I was to do if she would bite and scratch, or, as Cuddie phrased it, "nip pieces out of one."

"She will do nothing of the kind," returned Mrs. Crofton, "if you are gentle and forbearing; you must have exasperated her this morning. I hear that she pinched you."

I replied by drawing up my sleeve, and showed the discoloured and still raw flesh where the nipping process had been effected. My uncle looked really shocked, but my aunt said calmly—"It is precisely as I said; you must have made her very angry. Now probably she will take a dislike to you, and it will be some time before you gain any influence over her."

Accordingly I narrated my morning's experience: how I had been awaked by something sitting on my chest, how I had desired Gussie to go to her own bed, and all the rest of the story; but Mrs. Crofton only shook her head, and reiterated her opinion that I had not been sufficiently patient. "However," she continued, "I have business now

to attend to, and I must go away, and in conclusion I can only beg you for your own sake to be humble, good-tempered, and industrious. You understand that Gussie is under your care, and I shall hold you responsible for her general improvement, also for all defects in her appearance and behaviour. To-morrow, under Sibyl's direction, you will arrange about her lessons, and I should be very much pleased if you could get her hair to curl."

I felt very much as if a tiger's cub had been committed to my fostering care; if I had been appointed nursery-governess to a young pantheress, my task could scarcely have been more hopelessly trying. I knew that there would be everlasting *casus belli* between Miss Augusta and myself. As Mrs. Crofton was leaving the room I said—"I will do my best, aunt, and I will endeavour to be patient, but I cannot promise you to take unresistingly such treatment as I experienced this morning. I will always try persuasion, but if that fail what can I do but use force?"

I felt that I had better say so much, since I knew that there had been turbulent seasons when, according to the nursery chronicles, the young lady had cleared the table of the tea things, tossed baby's basket into the fire, and thrown Rebecca's work-box out of the window; and surely, then, vigorous measures were essential! Mrs. Crofton replied vaguely "that physical force was always injurious to a child, and that she hoped we should get on comfortably without collisions, and that I should see the necessity of controlling my own temper." Still I had made my protest, and in some measure I felt relieved. Sibyl now desired that I would follow her to the school-room, and tremblingly I obeyed, wondering sadly whether Miss Hollingsworth would be my friend, or whether she would render my position at Crofton Lawn more unendurable than it promised to be already. I admired her for her firmness in refusing to admit the refractory Gussie into her own especial precincts, and yearningly I hoped that she might be kind, and wise, and altogether good, and that she might take poor me under her wing, and, so far as in her lay, shelter me

from the adverse gales that threatened to blow so roughly about my undefended head, or at least strengthen me to meet with courage and composure all coming shocks of the rising tempest.

Was this being launched on the voyage of life? If so, it was rough enough, and cold, and dark, and dreary. Oh! to be in the haven again, if it were only for one little hour!

CHAPTER XVIII.

NORA.

SILENTLY I followed Sibyl to the school-room, being conscious all the while that I should cut but a very indifferent figure before the governess and the cousins to whom I was about to be introduced; for the traces of tears were still upon my face, and the hurry, and travel, and annoyances of the last few days, not to speak of the real misery I had endured, had banished all my roses, and dimmed my eyes, and given to my countenance a heavy, hopeless, not to say stupid expression. I should have liked to retire to my attic, in order to make a little toilet before any further presentations took place, but I felt afraid of Sibyl, who walked on before me without uttering a single word or deigning a backward glance; and the courage which had sustained me in the beginning of that morning's conversation had very nearly deserted me, and was still sinking, as with aching heart I contemplated the unpromising future of my life at Crofton Lawn.

I began to feel like a wild bird whose wings have been clipped: I had never been accustomed to much control, and the restraints which would certainly be imposed upon me here I regarded as unendurable. I hated the very name of Cotswoldbury, and I longed to fly away,—that is, in plain parlance, "run away;" only I had not the remotest notion where to run to; I could not get back to St. Eldred's without begging my way, which might be romantic, but would certainly be unpleasant; and I could not hope that

Cecilia Churchman would be allowed to receive me, however earnestly she might have wished it. Ah! discipline is very hard to bear—and yet there comes to every one a season when it must be borne. Happy they who bear the yoke in their youth, and bear it patiently, and even thankfully, knowing at last, that "no chastening for the present seemeth to be joyous, but grievous; nevertheless, afterward it yieldeth the peaceable fruit of righteousness unto them which are exercised thereby."

We traversed several passages, and at last stopped before a baize-covered door, at the end of a broad gallery. Sibyl turned round then, and, with the air of a young princess, signified by an imperious gesture of her hand that I was to enter with her. In another moment I found myself standing behind her, in a large, pleasant room, that seemed to be a compound of library, boudoir, and study. There were maps and drawings upon the wall, and there were several book-cases, and some hanging shelves, amply furnished. Two handsome globes occupied two opposite corners, a square piano filled a snug recess, and the usual furniture of an ordinary sitting-room completed the picture upon which I gazed. But just then, though I took in at a glance the whole aspect of the place, my attention my concentred in the people who occupied the room. At the head of a table near the fire, her open desk before her, and pen in hand, sat a lady, decidedly not handsome, not distinguished-looking, and no longer young. I thought her then quite an elderly person, well stricken in years; she was really about forty years of age, which seems old indeed to juveniles of fifteen and thereabouts. Now, having myself reached that venerable term of years, I feel myself not old at all, and, I am ashamed to say, scarcely elderly.

Miss Hollingsworth looked up brightly as we entered—I had never seen a sweeter face than that which questioningly, and yet kindly, sought mine; it was beautiful to me, infinitely more so than the delicately-tinted, classically-featured face of the beautiful Sibyl; and yet my cousin's countenance was faultless in symmetry, outline, and complexion; it only

needed *expression*. Whereas, Miss Hollingsworth had lost her youthful lilies and roses, if, indeed, she ever possessed any; she had an ugly nose, of a decidedly snub character, and there was a scar on her cheek, which alone was a disfigurement. But there was good sense and there was tenderness in the lines of her mouth; there was a decision in the firm, square chin, and a world of purity and kindliness in her clear, grey, lustrous eyes,—eyes that seemed to read your very soul with their soft yet steady gaze, yet eyes that told of a thousand beautiful things, and, in their silent eloquence, spoke volumes of truth, and goodness, and wisdom, and all sweet, womanly affections.

Sibyl said haughtily enough, "Miss Hollingsworth, I have brought you Margaret Torrington; and mamma wishes to know if you can spare Fanny and Bella in half an hour,—she wishes them to drive with her."

"Fanny can go, certainly," returned Miss Hollingsworth, —"she has nearly finished her morning's duties; but Bella has been so idle, that I fear she will have to forego the pleasure."

"That means, of course, that you refuse to let her go?" returned Sibyl sneeringly.

"Bella knows my rules," replied Miss Hollingsworth steadily. "Duty is our first consideration, and she has no more work to do from day to day than she can easily accomplish. I am sorry that she wastes so much time as frequently to get into arrears. This morning she has done literally nothing; it will therefore be impossible for her to conclude her regular lessons much before the early dinner."

Bella and Fanny were evidently twins, being precisely of a size, and being so much alike that I wondered whether I should ever be able to distinguish one from another. I knew now which was Bella, because she sat with lowering countenance, scribbling over the back of her exercise-book, while Fanny looked up with alacrity and replied that she would be quite ready at the time appointed. The other occupants of the room were three in number. A tall girl, looking nearly as old as Sibyl, and very nearly as beautiful,

was bending over some German books; another girl of eleven or thereabouts was busy with pencil-drawing; and on a mattressed reclining-board lay a pale, slight child, with fair, wavy hair and light blue eyes. I could see at a glance that she was deformed, and that she looked ill, weary, and miserable. She seemed younger than her sister, who was perpetrating a series of arches most frightfully out of the perpendicular; but I afterwards found that she was three years older, being almost fourteen, while the twins were sixteen, and Leonora, the eldest of Miss Hollingsworth's pupils, was in her eighteenth year.

As I soon afterwards discovered, Leonora was most anxious to escape from the school-room. Miss Hollingsworth was quite willing to dispense with her society. Mr. and Mrs. Crofton did not object to accept the young lady as grown up; they would have permitted her to share in all the honours and privileges of her elder sister had not Sibyl herself strenuously declaimed. She violently protested against Nora's introduction, averring that one Miss Crofton at a time was quite enough, and that Nora must not think of coming out while she was still unmarried, or, at least, disengaged; while Nora, on her part, very naturally resented her sister's interference, and pined for the liberty which was certainly her due, and also made sundry abortive efforts to get "out" surreptitiously, which always resulted in ignominious defeat and wrathful disappointment. Why Sibyl, who certainly did not love Miss Hollingsworth, was so anxious that her services should be retained, I never could find out, unless it were that she exercised some influence over Leonora, and restrained or soothed her when the girl, fretted beyond endurance, threatened open rebellion.

Such was the party to which I was introduced; and in another minute Sibyl had left the room, and I was standing before Miss Hollingsworth awaiting her pleasure. She motioned me kindly to a seat, and gave me a book to read, while she continued intent upon the exercises on which she was engaged. As I quickly found, my new governess, though gentle and considerate, was a rigid disciplinarian, as,

indeed, it behoved her to be if she wished to maintain her authority in that house. I had heard from nurse already the story of "our governesses:" how one had succeeded another in rapid succession; how there was a "*mademoiselle*" at one period, and a "*fraulein*" at another; how ladies, young and old, handsome and ugly, competent and incompetent, had essayed the education of the Misses Crofton; and how one and all had miserably failed, either being summarily dismissed or dismissing themselves, till Miss Hollingsworth arrived, and gathered up the reins of authority so skilfully as to keep in reasonable order the untamed and hitherto untameable creatures in the school-room. Only, she never would receive Gussie as one of her pupils; she firmly declined the charge, and, quietly stating her intention of relinquishing her post if that extraordinary young lady entered her precincts, succeeded in carrying her point.

Twelve o'clock came, and the books were put aside. Leonora, with a yawn, declared she was insufferably tired; Fanny ran away to prepare for her drive; Eliza, saying somethings about rabbits, disappeared also; while Bella, all pout and frown, and angry hurried gesture, scribbled away furiously at her translation. Miss Hollingsworth was carefully wiping her pen, and preparing, I know, to address me, when Leonora came rapidly up to the fireplace where I was sitting.

"So you are Margaret Torrington!" she said, with something of Sibyl's imperious tone and look; but with her haughtiness there was mingled something of a gentler, softer nature. At least, I thought so as I met the full gaze of her deep blue eyes, and admitted that I *was* Margaret Torrington!

"You have been crying? Has Sibyl been tormenting you? I thought she looked in a worse temper than ever when she brought you in."

"Nora! Nora!" said Miss Hollingsworth, reprovingly.

"It's of no use Nora-ing me, you know, Holly, when I want to speak, and I am not going to say anything wrong. Margaret is my cousin, and I may ask her as many questions as I like."

"My dear, I do not wish to interfere with your liberty of speech; you are old enough to govern yourself; only be careful that you do not ask your cousin questions which it may be painful to her to answer. As a rule, people are not much given to proclaiming the cause of their tears."

"I only want to know if Sibyl has commenced her pranks!"

"You had better let Sibyl alone. At any rate it would be more generous to leave your cousin to form her own unbiassed opinion of your sisters."

"Oh dear, Holly, how dreadfully precise and good you are! It all comes of your being an old maid."

"Thank you, my dear, in the name of the whole single sisterhood, to which, most undoubtedly, I belong. It is no small compliment you pay us: goodness is the best of all attributes, and precision is by no means to be despised."

"Do hush, Holly; you are not simply good, but provokingly so; you never do anything till you have satisfied yourself as to its being the very best thing that you could do under the circumstances. Now, I like to please myself, and go my own way without reference to other people."

"That can never be, Nora. We are essentially dependent creatures, and the freest among us cannot be actually independent; we are only units among thousands, each one a separate unit, like ourselves, with a separate will and separate circumstances, which yet are inseparably connected with the whole mass. I tell you, Nora, that you will never—no, never—have your own way continuously in this world."

"That is hard, Holly! Have you *never* had your own way? Tell me now, most excellent Mentoria."

Miss Hollingsworth shook her head, and smiled rather sadly as she replied: "Very seldom! Whenever I have set my heart upon anything or any plan, adverse circumstances have generally interfered, and whenever I have obstinately and violently, as it were, determined to have my own way, I have generally succeeded in having it, and—"

"Well, Holly; why do you pause? Of course, one may

get one's own way in time, if one battles for it long enough and heartily enough."

"Precisely. I always found that if I strove hard enough I gained my end; but, Nora, I never so strove and so succeeded but I repented of what I had done."

"Why should you repent?"

"I generally found out that I had been utterly mistaken in my estimate of the thing so ardently desired. When at last I had my will, I had either ceased to care about it at all, or I discovered that my seeming good brought with it actual and unmistakeable evil. That which in my blindness I had coveted so vehemently as a rich, unmingled blessing, often turned out to be a weary, corroding care—perhaps a veritable curse."

"Well, perhaps you were peculiarly unfortunate. Some people are born, as Tom says, to 'knock under' to the wills of others. Some must rule, and some must obey—some must lead, and some must follow. Now, I mean to be a ruler and a leader in the world to which I belong!"

"It will be just as God pleases."

"Don't, Holly! That is unfair of you! You know I cannot, dare not, contradict you. Of course, I believe in God's power, and all that; but I believe also in my own—well, what you call my 'own forces.'"

"It is quite right of you to believe in them to a certain extent. If I gave you a thousand pounds to expend in advancing your interests in life, it would be right that you should properly appreciate the value and the power of money; but it would not be right that you should spend the sum I had given you wastefully and injuriously to yourself; also without one thought of me, the giver."

"Of course not. When you do give me a thousand pounds, Holly, I will spend them wisely, and be duly grateful. Now, please not to preach any more. My forces will be measured with Sibyl's pretty quickly, for I am determined not to be kept in the schoolroom after Christmas. *I will come out!*"

"Is the school-room so very miserable a place, Nora?"

"On the contrary, I am sure it is the happiest corner in all the house; only I do not like to be compelled to remain in it against my will. Sibyl came out when she was six months younger than I am. I only want my rights."

"And you fancy you would be perfectly satisfied if you knew that at Christmas you would certainly leave the school-room and be introduced?"

"Yes; for a time I should be satisfied. Still, I am afraid Sibyl would be always trying to thwart me; and then, if I had more admirers than she had,—if even I were engaged before her! Oh, Holly, that would be glorious. And just fancy what a fuss there would be. She would be half crazy."

"And to make your sister half crazy would delight you! Oh, Nora!"

"I confess it would. Never shake your dear old head at me, Holly; I am incorrigible; I am not your model pupil, although you have taken pains unspeakable with me. I am afraid you will not succeed either with Bella or Fanny. You must try your hand on Margaret: she is not a Crofton, or only a bit of one; so perhaps you may make something of her."

"Perhaps I may. But, Nora, I think Margaret already has cause of complaint against us. She is a new comer, and we are neglecting her sadly."

"So we are. I beg your pardon, Cousin Margaret, but I always think of myself first,—it is a way we Croftons have. Now, then, do tell me,—have Sybil and you already come to issue?"

"No," I answered; "but my uncle and your mamma have been talking to me about my prospects and about my studies here, and I felt desolate and hopeless, and, like a silly child, I cried. But I am not going to cry any more."

"That is right. As a rule, tears are for babies and women without sense. Do you like Sibyl?"

"*No*," I replied bluntly and emphatically.

"That is right also. You will be of my party?"

Not understanding, I looked up questioningly in Nora's

face. Miss Hollingsworth said gravely, "If Margaret Torrington is wise, she will have nothing to do with parties: she will only gain uncertain friends, and make certain enemies."

"Ah, well! we shall see. If she is to be your model pupil, I suppose she must maintain a discreet neutrality. But how I do hate prudent people! How I should have hated Bertha Tredgold!"

"Bertha Tredgold," I exclaimed, so astonished that I could scarcely speak. "Is it possible that you know her?"

It was now the turn of my companions to look surprised. Miss Hollingsworth even took off her spectacles—a habit she had when more than usually perplexed. Nora returned quietly, "Of course I do not know her; I never saw her in my life. Is she a friend of yours?"

"Yes; I have known her ever since she was a baby—I know her sister Alice, and all the family: but how came you to hear of her?"

"I have heard of her scores of times from Holly. Holly finished her, you know,—that is, with the help of masters. She is very handsome, and a great heiress; she is fond of Holly, and writes to her every now and then."

"Ah! it is another Bertha Tredgold," I replied. "My Bertha is quite a child, three years younger than I am; and she has never had a governess in her life, though now, the family being better off, she goes to a day-school in St. Eldred's."

"Queer, though, that there should be two Bertha Tredgolds," said Nora to Miss Hollingsworth.

"What is your Bertha like?" asked the governess.

I described my old playmate as well as I could, dwelling particularly on her rich, black hair, and marvellous dark eyes.

Miss Hollingsworth replied, "They must be relations: you have exactly pourtrayed my pupil as she was when I first knew her, at twelve or thirteen years of age. Yet I never heard of any cousin or relative of the same name, and I was quite one of the family, and I knew all their affairs. And what sort of people are your Tredgolds?"

I told her as much as I thought proper, and Nora at once concluded that the name was a mere coincidence; there could be no kinship, she averred, between a poor fisherman and one of the proudest families in the North."

"My Tredgolds are a Cornish family," I said.

"Strange!" said Miss Hollingsworth. "My friends also are of Cornish descent; in fact Tredgold is a Cornish name, and, long, long ago, the family held vast estates there, and were immensely rich and powerful. Once we travelled down to Tredgold-Austell, and saw the Court, a grand old place sinking to decay. It was formerly the seat of the Tredgold family; long since it has passed from its hereditary owners, and it is now let or sold to a rich, retired tradesman."

"Then," I cried, "the two Berthas must be related; for my Tredgolds came from Tredgold-Austell." And on the spur of the moment I was going to divulge Gilbert's cherished secret, but luckily remembered that I had no right to chatter about his private affairs which had been revealed to me in confidence, and therefore I maintained a prudent reserve. Also it struck me that in that house, the less I said about Gilbert the better; the less I talked of my old life at Kelver House the better; but in our mutual knowledge of a Bertha Tredgold, there existed at once a sort of tie between me and Miss Hollingsworth; for Bertha Tredgold, of Graythwaite Tower, in Cumberland, had been her favourite pupil and was still her much-loved friend.

CHAPTER XIX.

A MAGNIFICENT VOICE.

THE next day I settled regularly to my duties, some of which were pleasant and easy enough; others, alas! were so disagreeable, and seemed so impracticable, that I began to doubt whether, indeed, they could be included in the category of actual duties; also, to entertain serious misgivings respecting the truth of that oft-quoted and excellent old wisdom-saw, "Where there's a will there's a way."

I am sure my will was good to live peaceably, and, if it might be, not unhappily, in my uncle's household; I am sure I strove with all my powers to tame the wild creature committed to my charge; I submitted to all kinds of aggressions on my rights, and even bore patiently blows and nips that were very trying to flesh and blood, as well as to one's temper. Only, I suppose, I sadly wanted experience; and, perhaps, I succumbed where I should have stoutly held my own, and stood out uncompromisingly where I should have given way; anyhow, I was utterly unsuccessful, and was always baffled in every attempt I made either to force or to conciliate the formidable Gussie.

There had gone forth an edict, both medical and maternal, that warm water should not be permitted in the regular nursery ablutions; it was especially enjoined that Miss Augusta should take a cold bath every morning,—just one good dip, and no more,—and then submit herself to brisk friction and rapid dressing at my hands; all of which it was easy enough to prescribe, but dreadfully difficult to carry into execution. I might as well have tried to coax a sleepy, sleek pussy-cat from her repose upon the hearthrug to a voluntary bath, as Gussie into the great tub of ice-cold water that was placed for her accommodation in an adjoining room. I used at first to reason with her, and to try persuasion, and even sought to beguile her into obedience; but Gussie was not one to be quickly duped. She was clever enough, as I speedily discovered, remarkably astute and far-seeing, and endowed with perceptions alarmingly acute, her tender age considered; neither was argument of any avail, and, as for "moral suasion," about which I heard a great deal just then, either I did my "suasion" very badly, or I had impenetrable material to work upon. I am inclined now to believe that both alternatives represent the real state of the case: Gussie was not of persuadable mould, and I was not sufficiently patient or diplomatic.

At any rate, whatever might be the cause of failure, failure there was, most exasperating, most decided. I often woke long before dawn, thinking of the ordeal that awaited me,

and wondering how the work would be accomplished that morning, or whether it would be accomplished at all; and if not, what Mrs. Crofton would say to me. Then, presently, my charming companion would commence to perform gymnastics on and about her bed, whistling shrilly all the while, and singing queer songs, that I was sure she composed herself, improvising them to suit the occasion. At last would come nurse's tap at the door, and an intimation that Miss Gussie's bath was awaiting her; then I rose straightway, and made the sort of *demi-toilette* most convenient to a person who is about to be splashed from head to foot; then I mildly intimated to the young lady that I was ready to attend to her, then I requested her to get out of bed, then I entreated her to obey, then I urged, then I commanded, and finally, I called for Rebecca, and in our arms, all shrieking, and fighting, and struggling, we bore Gussie to the scene of action, where suddenly unrolling the blanket in which we had wrapped her, for security as well as for warmth, we soused her over head and ears, and got her out of the water again while she was still sobbing and battling for breath. Then ought to have ensued a rubbing process; but my amiable intentions were frustrated by the victim herself, who generally chose to rush about the two rooms minus costume, —a course of conduct, I had been warned, to which she was very prone, but which I was immediately to circumvent.

Circumvent, indeed! Why did not Mrs. Crofton desire me to circumvent Euroclydon, or the winter storms, or the lightning, or the wild birds upon the Woldscote Hills? It would have been quite as easy as to circumvent her daughter Augusta, when she chose to dance her goblin-dances in the early morning, arrayed as was her mother Eve in Paradise.

All I could do was to summon back Rebecca, forcibly to catch her, and to shake her into her clothes. Then came the plaiting of her long tails, which was always a work of time, as well as a feat of skill;—of course curls were incompatible with the matutinal bath, as not one particle of natural wave or curl was there in her dull, lank hair. By this time I was very tired, and generally very cold, and

I had to complete my own toilet as expeditiously as possible, in order to present myself at Miss Hollingsworth's breakfast-table. Sometimes nurse, out of sheer compassion, brought me a cup of coffee from the nursery,—a refreshment I really needed after the conflict I had sustained, and the chill resulting from the liberal splashing with which Gussie generally favoured me.

After breakfast, I was supposed to superintend Gussie's education; and sometimes she really did read a few lines, or committed to memory, after a fashion of her own, a tense or two of a French verb, a line or two of geography, or a verse of poetry. This was when she was rational, and comparatively amiable; a sa rule, she tossed the books about, inked her fingers and her dress, stopped her ears and shrieked at me if I attempted to lecture her on the improvement of her conduct, or else chanted, in her own wild way, the weird songs that I felt so sure were her own composition.

And yet in these strange canticles of hers there was certainly real music. They were like nothing I had ever heard before; they abounded in discords, and marvellous transitions of time and tune: still they were not the mere hummings and shoutings of a noisy child; and I found, after a while, that some of them were well established in her memory, and that she had actually made an effort to adapt to them a kind of accompaniment which she picked out on the old tin kettle of a pianoforte which had long since been banished from the school-room, and delivered over to nursery strummings. Of course we had an orthodox instruction book, —Cramer's, I think,—and of course his scales and exercises; and I was expected thereby to induct Gussie into the first principles of musical science: but when we were seated at the instrument, not a note would my promising young pupil strike, not one atom of information would she receive. In vain I tried to beguile her into learning "a pretty little tune" to play to her papa at Christmas; in vain I put her lean, long fingers on the keys; in vain I counted out loud, and played the bars an octave higher. Not a movement, not a single word could be elicited: though sometimes she would

answer me speedily enough; but wrongly—ridiculously so—catching herself up if, by mistake, as was now and then the case, she gave a correct reply. Oh, the trouble I had with the obstinate little animal! How rang in my ears, for hours after the wretched music-lesson, the jumble of semibreves and crotchets, rests, sharps and flats, and triple and common time! And then to think the monkey would perform fast enough, at her own sweet will, and after her own fashion, and not discreditably either. How rejoiced I was when my penance was over, and I could go to the school-room, and become pupil instead of teacher!—for I found Miss Hollingsworth an excellent instructress, and I began to see that it behoved me in my present circumstances to make hay while the sun shone; in other words, to learn all I could, and everything as thoroughly as I could, while I had the opportunity. I had the sense to see that I ought to put up with a great deal of uncomfortableness, even with assaults from Gussie, for the sake of the educational advantages which, once removed, would probably be mine no more.

And I had seen enough of the world now, small as was my experience, to know that a woman who desires to earn her own living in any capacity in which her stock of trade lies in her brains, must not object to have her accomplishments catalogued, and her capabilities canvassed and tested, as if she were a race-horse entered for the Derby. It was all very well for Sibyl and Leonora to learn just as much or just as little as they chose, but it would be insanity in Margaret Torrington to study with half a heart, or to give way to fits of girlish indolence. Sibyl and Leonora, so far as one could see, were in the condition of those envied—mind I do not say *enviable*—people, who are said to find their bread ready buttered for their eating; and very fine bread it was, too—social muffins and crumpets, crisply toasted, and plentifully spread with the freshest of butter. While I was not very certain about the bread, and must certainly look for a dry crust only, if I did not work hard for the butter of a pleasant competency. After all, I might enjoy my butter more completely—*when I got it.*

One hour in the afternoon completed my attendance on Gussie, and then, till it was time to dress her to go down to dessert, and after that till her bedtime, I was free to profit by Miss Hollingsworth's instructions. Nora was kind to me; Bella and Fanny never interfered; Eliza was disagreeable, but she dared not in her governess's presence show off her unamiable tempers; while poor Jessie and I soon became great friends, and we two spent many a happy evening hour with Miss Hollingsworth while the others were disporting themselves in the gayer atmosphere of the drawing-room.

It was good for me, this life of regular hard work, for it fully occupied my mind, and left small leisure for vain regrets for that which had passed away for ever: it was good, too, excellently good for me, this constant intercourse with a large-minded, superior woman, whose stores of experience were ample and well digested; only I never profited by them as I might have done,—never, till it was too late.

Sometimes, but not often, I heard from Miriam Downing: she was very well and very happy with her dear Miss Everetts; already she could help in taking the junior classes, and she was working hard and joyfully at every branch of study recommended to her. They were pretty, artless letters, those simple, girlish epistles, written often a few lines at a time, very much after the fashion of a chatty diary, sometimes running on day after day till they had made quite a little history. For there was a peculiar charm in Mirrie's descriptions: I could not disguise from myself that they were very interesting; and once, when I read aloud one of them to Miss Hollingsworth and Nora, they both declared it was as good as a chapter out of a story-book.

"She must be a dear child!" said Miss Hollingsworth, when one evening she and I were alone, and I had been favouring her with sundry paragraphs from Mirrie's last long letter. "Margaret, it must have added very much to your trouble to be separated from her."

She looked up as she spoke, and caught sight of the vivid blush that was mantling my cheeks. I could not answer her, for I had not courage to tell the truth, still less would I

have deigned to tell a lie; and my heart was saying to me, "it was no trouble to leave Mirrie Downing behind me; I like her, that is I tolerate her, far better absent than present."

"What is it, Margaret?" asked Miss Hollingsworth, presently. She had begun and finished a whole row of knitting during the pause which ensued upon her remark, which was indeed a question.

"Nothing," I replied. "Only I never was so bewitched with Miriam Downing as other people were. I would have worked for her, and I would have shared with her my last sixpence, had it been requisite, and I should be very sorry to hear of any harm happening to her; but I do not, and never could, love her very much."

"That is rather singular. I should have thought so sweet a tempered child could hardly give you offence; and if words are to be trusted, she seems to regard you with a very sincere affection."

"I believe she does; but you know, Miss Hollingsworth, there are, and there always will be, cases of unrequited affection."

"That is true; but I am curious to know how it was that in this case the love was unrequited. Margaret, I could almost fancy you were jealous of her."

"What makes you think so?"

"Many little speeches you have made from time to time; and yet—"

"I was jealous of her, I believe. Susan said I was. But, really, everybody made such a fuss about her! And till she came I had all the love of my father and mother; afterwards I had to share it with her."

"Did they love you less the more they loved Miriam Downing?"

"I cannot say they did; but somehow my position seemed altered. I was still first with dear papa and mamma, I know; but the place I had held with many people she seemed to take. You see, I had been accustomed to be first and sole, and I could not easily bring myself to be contented with less than I had formerly received."

Miss Hollingsworth looked grave. "Margaret, we have

fallen upon a subject I have intended to mention to you for some time past. You are naturally jealous; you want to be sole as well as to be first; supremacy is your darling aim. My dear, I am afraid your course in life will not be a happy one. You will not make friends, or, making them, you will not keep them. This would be a pity, Margaret, even if you were the petted child of fortune; for there is no one on earth who can afford to dispense with friends, but in your position it is doubly serious. I am sometimes afraid you will irremediably offend Mrs. Crofton, and so permanently estrange your uncle."

"I should not mind if I did," I replied, hotly. "I have little to thank my uncle for, and, as for Mrs. Crofton and Sibyl, I hold them in contempt."

"Hush! hush! I command you!" was the almost stern reply. "Mr. and Mrs. Crofton are the heads of this house, and as such they must be respected even in our private converse. They are my employers, and they are your nearest relative; it is not for us to speak evil of them."

"What have I to thank them for?"

"A great deal, it seems to me; they give you a respectable home, and they give you the opportunity of completing the education your father commenced—two inestimable blessings, let me tell you, Margaret. You look scornful—oh, child, child! you do not know how earnestly you ought to thank God for the shelter of a safe, respectable home, where you are guarded and shielded from the evil that is in the world. You cannot guess to what a girl is exposed when she has no legal protectors; when she is tossed about upon the waves of shifting circumstance; when there is no one who will certainly be her champion, whatever be her wrongs. I know it all, Margaret, for I too am an orphan, and I was left at fifteen to make my own way in life. I had no uncle to give me the protection of his roof—no relative who could aid me in any sort; and I went out into the wide world to fight my own battles, and to toil for my support, no one lending me a helping hand, no one giving me a word of warning or encouragement."

"But you came safely through it all, Holly; you have steered clear of shoals and quicksands; I, too, may do the same."

"By God's mercy I escaped all harm, but the first five years of my experience were terrible. I grew old before my time—I was, as it were, cheated of my youth. I have been happier since I was thirty than ever before; younger, too, in heart and feeling since I have learned to look upon life and its changes dispassionately."

"I do not know that I should ever care to regard everything quite dispassionately. Life would be nothing without its romance; I could not live a prosy, monotonous life for long together."

"Yet many would have thought your life at North Coombe extremely prosy. Your cousins here would have wearied of its monotony."

"Ah, Holly, there was no prosiness in my dear old home; there is no monotony by the sea—the free wild sea, that changes every hour. I had so much to make me happy; my beautiful rambles on the shore; my lessons in botany and natural history; my long rides with papa; my voyages in the "Little Gipsy;" my chats with the fishermen; my lessons with dear mamma; my cosy afternoon readings in the Virginia-creeper bower in our garden; even my quarrels with Susan, which mostly ended in extra petting; and always the lovely music of the waves, and their ever-changing beauty in sunshine and in storm—the morning's rosy flush, the evening's golden glow, the sparkling blue and silver of the noon-tide hour. My life at home, up to the time of the wreck of the "Little Gipsy," was all one fairy tale. Gilbert used to talk to me about the voyage of life, and I liked the simile, and I like it still, it is so very apt; and he often told me that I was in an elfin coracle, with golden paddles, and silken sails, dancing up and down on the ripples of a land-locked bay, that I mistook for at least an arm of the great sea itself. I shall never trim my sails on that stormless little bay again!"

"No, never, Margaret; your course is now upon the real

waves and surges. There is no returning to the careless joys of childhood: once launched upon the broad sea-water we must go on, ever on, till the end comes. God bring us both, Margaret, to the haven of His eternal joy."

I made no answer; I sat looking into the fire, and thinking of what Gilbert had said to me that evening at the North Fort about having the *Pilot* on board, and going by the chart, and so steering straight for the blessed haven. Like sweet echoes of lovely song, the words came back to me now; but, alas! as nothing more—nothing more. I knew that I sailed without either chart or Pilot, though the chart was at hand, and the Pilot calling to me out of the darkness and the gloom that gathered round me. "Not yet," I thought, "not yet. Some day, at a more convenient season, I will entertain that heavenly Guest. But now I have so much to think of; life is before me, and I must live *my* life—I cannot dream it! My brain is all confusion, my heart is all tumult, when I think of the coming days; I shall have to carve out my own way, and I will not—no, I will not be controlled. There is no one on earth to whom I owe obedience; since real home-ties are not for me, why should I acknowledge artificial bonds that after all are fetters? I will go my own way; I will choose my own path, and it shall be an ascending one!—my own aims, and they shall be lofty! For the present—for a little while—I must submit to circumstances; I must complete my education; my music, too, I must work at that."

And on the spur of the moment I rose, and ran to the piano, and began to practise vigorously. I was now certain of what I had before suspected—that I had a very brilliant and delicate touch, and a fine ear; and that it rested with myself alone to conquer all digital and mere manual difficulties of execution.

Also, our music-master had said to me one morning—"Miss Torrington, do you know that you have a very remarkable voice?"

"A good one?" I asked, quietly.

"It is something more than good—it is magnificent in its

quality! If you were not a young lady, I should say that voice would make your fortune, Miss Torrington."

My heart beat high as I replied—"I may want it some day to make my fortune, Mr. Scott. What am I to do with it?"

"At present *nothing*—literally nothing."

"I do not understand."

"You have tried it too much already; if you go on practising those exercises, you will materially injure it. Never force your voice, especially at your age. Give up exercises and scales for two years; sing easy ballads of small compass, just to appease your natural longing after vocal practice; study expression. But sing nothing higher than upper *fa!* When the right time comes, exercise steadily but patiently. You will find your voice rapidly increasing in volume and in compass, but do not *rise* more than one note in a week. A voice like yours may be ruined by overstraining, or it may be carefully cultivated to the highest pitch of perfection."

I took the master's advice; I sang seconds sometimes to my cousins' duets, which were all simple enough, and I sang easy ballads, such as "Beautiful Spring," and "Annie Laurie," then in the zenith of their popularity. But I worked hard at instrumental music, and I always rose from the piano with a sense of triumph—I had always gained some ground, always achieved some victory! I was working towards an end, though no one knew it.

One day, too, my musical powers led to a result of which I had not dreamed. The afternoon was fading, and I was alone, as I imagined, in the dining-room. I had been practising carefully while the light lasted; but now, being unable to discern sharps from naturals, I amused myself with a certain little romance of my own, which I had composed of late. The idea sprang out of the chiming of the waves, as I had heard them many and many an evening, rising higher and higher, as the tide flowed in, till at length they broke in full thunderous diapasons upon the rocky shore!

I played on and on, till the darkness closed about me.

Now it was the low, sweet murmur of the far-off tide, plaintive and monotonous, but replete with melody; now a deeper sound, fuller and more instinct with harmony; now a dash, a roar, a ringing of great chords; but through it all, the low, sweet, silvery chiming.

I heard a burst of weeping, and, turning round, beheld Gussie seated on the hearthrug, crying, and mopping her eyes in her own peculiar fashion, with her tiny handkerchief crumpled up into a ball.

"What is it?" I asked, going to her.

"To my infinite astonishment she threw her arms round my neck, as I instinctively perceived with no intentions of nipping, and she sobbed out—"Oh, it was so beautiful! If you will play it again, cousin, I will be good to-night, and I'll have my bath quietly to-morrow morning."

Of course I complied; and Gussie kept her word. Henceforth I knew what bribes to offer, and what punishments to threaten. Presently a sort of armistice was effected; I could dispense with Rebecca's services, and Gussie learned to play in excellent time and tune, and *con expressione* too, the "Blue Bells of Scotland," and the air of the "Carnival of Venice."

CHAPTER XX.

MY ENEMY.

NOTWITHSTANDING my general dissatisfaction with Crofton Lawn, and with all its inmates, save Miss Hollingsworth and my cousins Jessie and Nora, time passed rapidly away; but Nora left the schoolroom early in the spring, and I saw little more of her, and Fanny and Bella were never very cordial with me. Now and then, I accompanied them, when they spent an hour after the late dinner in the drawing-room; and then I saw something of Cotswoldbury life, and, as far as a mere school-girl and a poor relation might, mingled in the strange new world about me. I was instructed by Sibyl, that I was not on any account to put myself forward in con-

versation,—I was never to propound my own opinions, which she had found out were quite different from her own, and altogether absurd,—above all things, I was never to speak to gentlemen unless directly addressed by them, and then merely to give a suitable response, and on no account hold any discourse with them. She would have liked to place the same embargo on Nora, but she could only succeed in putting her into a passion,—never in reducing her to that wholesome state of subjection which was so desirable on the part of a sister eighteen months younger than herself.

Mrs. Crofton never interfered with their quarrels; she always left them, as she said, to settle their own differences, which I speedily discovered to be a measure of prudence on her part; since any one acting as pacificator between Sibyl and Leonora would certainly have been incessantly employed in that truly blessed, but still unthankful work of peacemaking. Moreover, Mrs. Crofton was really afraid of making Sibyl angry: she did not hesitate to disobey, and even on occasion to defy, her lawful lord and master; and she had no hesitation, when the mood was upon her, in making him really furious; for, fortunately for himself and his family, my uncle had not any of the requisite qualifications for that most contemptible and unnatural of domestic characters, a hen-pecked husband; although there were times when, wearied of altercation, or unwilling to have his temper roused,—a proceeding which invariably made him bilious,—he would let things against which he inwardly protested, take their course, and, with a sort of "anything-for-peace" air, he would allow his wife to do exactly as she chose! Though I must do him the justice to remark, that there were also times when he could assert himself as became the head of the house, and that without temper, when wrong-doing was being perpetrated a little too glaringly for his sense of right and justice.

Neither did my aunt stand in awe of her eldest son, of whom I have said very little, because, when I first became a resident in Cotswoldbury, he was at Oxford, and till Christ-

mas-eve I never saw my cousin Tom, who was alternately spoiled and snubbed, and caressed and scolded by his sisters. Nora, too, was not always successful when she came to an encounter with her mamma; and as for Fanny and Bella, they were in a very proper state of discipline, and came when they were called, and did as they were bid, and quite believed in Sibyl's favourite precept that girls in the schoolroom might be seen occasionally, but should be never *heard!* Consequently, they were mute as fishes in the drawing-room, and demure as cats who meant to steal the cream as soon as ever they were left alone; while they indemnified themselves by talking as long and as loud as they chose in their own quarters, provided they did not exceed certain bounds prescribed by the judicious Holly. The younger children, except Gussie, were obedient from habits of compulsion; so that all, more or less, succumbed to the lady of the house, save the eldest daughter, who, in some inscrutable way, always contrived to gain her own ends, reduce her mother to silence, and tyrannise over her sisters, unless her papa interfered. Then, Miss Sibyl had to yield, or to "knock under," as Tom called her seasons of humiliation; and great was the rejoicing thereat, and little sympathy she gained, although no one, save Tom and Nora, dared openly to side with her opponent; for she was sure to pay the offender presently, and when he or she least expected it. But she got many a little thrust and many an oblique hint that must have been about as agreeable as Gussie's mildest nips or sudden pricks from pins in ambush.

Of course, Sibyl and Nora had their admirers. Sibyl, especially, was generally reputed to have half-a-dozen lovers in her train, and yet she was going up to town for her third season,—still disengaged. Tom drove her nearly wild when he came down at Easter, by telling her in the presence of the whole regiment of brothers and sister—the three other boys, Harry, Claude, and Horace, were home from school—that Nora would be married before her.

She turned away like an empress, not vouchsafing a reply, and Tom, reckless fellow, not being certain that the shaft

had gone home, proceeded to "touch her up," according to his own phraseology, a little more completely. So, chucking me under the chin,—a liberty I resented by looking as much like a threatening thunder-cloud as black brows and dark eyes could,—he exclaimed, "Why, even Margaret, chit as she is, will be a matron before *you*, Sib; she is so much handsomer than you are! Who cares for blonde beauties when there are hazel eyes and raven tresses in the way? Who would woo Rowena that has a chance with Rebecca? Who wants a pale Desdemona while Juliet stands by?"

I trembled literally as well as figuratively; I dreaded the tempest that would be sure to descend on my defenceless head. Could not the luckless youth have left me alone? Why must he go and complicate my position, which was difficult enough already? I had no patience with him; I began to entertain a rooted aversion towards him on the spot. Sibyl turned round instantly, her blue eyes flashing fury, and her fair face crimson to the temples,—even neck and arms were bathed in the roseate glow.

"How dare you stand there, Margaret Torrington," she cried hotly, "encouraging your cousin to make such insolent remarks? Really, the girls who are growing up nowadays are quite devoid of modesty; young men never take liberties unless they know their ground."

My cheeks now were nearly as hot as Sibyl's: it had been better for me if I had suffered the unmerited reproach in silence; but it was not in my nature to take rebuke—and rebuke I had not deserved—patiently! Fanny would have run off in a huff, without another word, and Bella would have turned sulky on the spot, and avoided Sibyl for a month; there was no Miss Hollingsworth present to give me timely warning; and so I rashly measured lances with Sibyl Crofton, all the cousinhood standing aghast to behold the fray. "I do not know what you mean by encouragement," I said, passionately; "your brother, I suppose, forgot for the moment I was not his sister when he ventured on a familiarity I beg may never be repeated. As for *you*, accusing me of want of modesty, it comes with a very bad grace from you,

who permit freedoms on the part of gentlemen which I never shall allow."

"Come, come, Margaret," interposed Tom, "you are coming it too strong; you are my own cousin, and, as I said, quite a chit at present. Sibyl, you are talking as if she were twenty. Why she isn't sixteen yet."

"She behaves as if she were five-and-twenty! Margaret, how dare you answer me thus?"

"Because you accuse me falsely. *I* could not help Tom talking nonsense. If you are never engaged or married, it will be no fault of mine." Sibyl was past speaking, her anger was so violent. I went on:—"I have not deserved the dreadful charge of 'immodesty,'—I hope I never shall. When I conduct myself improperly, even by a tone or glance, I am ready to forfeit the shelter of this roof!"

"Bravo, Margaret, my dear!" cried the insufferable and inconsiderate Tom, applauding by vehemently clapping his hands. "That's right! Never mind, Sib; give her as good as she brings! I declare it's as good as cockfighting to see you two girls at it! Both of you have proper spirits, but Margaret has the best of it, because she talks sense, and you, Sibyl, *ma belle*, talk nonsense! Come now, no real offence was meant, and therefore none should be taken. What's the use of tilting at Margaret in that fashion, my amiable sister? If you want some one on whom to wreak your implacable revenge, behold your victim!"

And, striking his shirt-front a violent blow, he fell languishingly on one knee before Sibyl, striving thus to give the quarrel a colouring of drollery; for he perceived that he had gone too far, and he knew too well what it was seriously to offend his eldest sister.

"Run away, Margaret," whispered Nora, while Tom was making a mock declamatory speech, and slapping his breast like a Roman Catholic penitent at confession. "It is of no use to try to be rational with Sibyl; all you can say will only tend to make her your enemy for life." I took the kindly hint and disappeared, though I felt rather like a coward; but then, Nora was right,—Sibyl offended was utterly un-

reasonable, and, once thoroughly offended, utterly implacable. I had a brave spirit; but I must confess I trembled at the idea of turning Sibyl into an avowed enemy,—for great was her power in the house of Crofton. But I had beaten a retreat. Discretion had been the better part of valour earlier in the conflict, for my enemy was Sibyl Crofton from that time forth. She took no very decided measures to evince her deep aversion; she only overlooked me, never speaking to me, except to reprimand me when other persons, particularly strangers, were by, altogether ignoring my existence, unless she had some special humiliation to effect.

But I soon found out the exact reverse of what one finds when one has "a friend at court." Sibyl simply not liking me, and Sibyl hating me with a mortal hatred, were two very different aspects of affairs. Constantly, and when I least expected it, I found myself thwarted, as by some invisible power; my plans, if I had any, were ever defeated, my motives were constantly misconstrued, and myself painfully disregarded, when every one else was pointedly considered. And I, who had always battled for my rights, who had striven pertinaciously for the first place up to the time of my leaving Kelver House, having never brooked a rival, found all this hard enough to bear. Instead of being first and foremost, I was nowhere; even the servants were tacitly encouraged to be rude to me, and they speedily discovered that they might neglect Miss Torrington with impunity; while Cuddie's unchecked insolence became well-nigh intolerable. This was fierce discipline,—and, oh! how bitterly was Mirrie Downing avenged! I was the orphan now,—the dependent, the waif that the great ocean of life had thrown up on an inhospitable shore. I had cruelly wished to make her feel her position, and I had succeeded in effecting my purpose many and many a time; but I had never desired to make her really uncomfortable: I only asked that I might rule, that I might be the mistress, that I should assume to myself the lion's share of the love, and admiration, and esteem of all around, leaving her such scraps as I could well dispense with; but I had never thought of actually ill

treating her, of making her utterly miserable,—nay, I meant to be very good and kind to her, patronising and even petting her, provided she never interfered with me. Whilst I was daily and hourly tortured, and made to feel myself an interloper, a person tolerated for certain reasons, an outcast from the family circle; and the more humble-pie I ate, the more there was to eat, till I began to doubt whether it would not be better to reject altogether that unpopular dish, and assert myself in any fashion that seemed best.

But I was no longer the Margaret Torrington of olden days. I felt cowed and timid. I began to shrink away from people, as a dog accustomed to ill-treatment shrinks away from anticipated blows. I became moody, sullen, morose,—even Miss Hollingsworth and I were not such friends as we had been in the beginning.

Towards the end of May the family went up to town, and Leonora was, of course, to be presented. She was wild with delight, and she confided to me all her schemes of pleasure, and all her designs, especially her determination to outshine Sibyl.

"How I pity you school-girls!" said Nora, carelessly watching me, as I sat mending my old crape tucks. I had learned the use of my needle now from sore necessity, for my mourning was getting very shabby, and there was no one to make or mend for me, neither when my cousins had their new spring dresses was anything said about the renovation of my wardrobe. But this, too, was very necessary discipline; had I never been driven to it I might to this day have been that unfortunate and inconsistent creature—a woman unhandy with her needle. Ah! there is no school-master like experience, though his fees, I must admit, are heavy; and there is no governess like stern necessity. I have often been thankful since that I was thus compelled to learn the noble and truly feminine art of stitchery; now I can cut out, and turn, and turn again, and darn, and patch, and trim, and furbish to perfection, till with my needle and my shears, like Burns's matronly friend, I can

"Make auld claithes look amaist like new."

Of course it came by degrees, and at first I was clumsy and slow, and had to spend hours with my thimble on my finger when I was longing to be practising my beloved music; but after awhile I succeeded better, and was surprised at my own industry and inventive genius, and still more surprised to find I really enjoyed the turning of a dress, or the making of a garment.

"Why do you pity us?" I asked, threading another needle with crape-cotton, and wishing Cuddie were not so dexterous in making rents.

"Because you are not going to town—not going into society, not going to be properly dressed, or to ride in Rotten-row, or to drive in the parks, or to be admired; because you are going to stay here, shut up with the dear, prim old Holly, learning lessons, and keeping to rules from day to day. However, your turn will come, I suppose."

"Not mine, I think, Nora!"

"Dear me, *no!*" I never thought of it; but I dare say you will never be properly introduced."

"Not in the way to which you allude, certainly; but I mean to introduce myself presently, after my own fashion."

"Good gracious, Margaret! what can you mean? Do you mean to come out here in Cotswoldbury? Sibyl will never let you!"

"No! I did not think of 'coming out' at all, as you understand it. Nora, you must see my life is going to be a very different one from yours: you *are* going into 'society'—it is your due, I suppose; you will be admired and courted, and, I dare say, loved; you will marry happily, I hope, and you will be rich and gay, and you will never know a care or a want; comforts and luxuries will alike be showered upon you;—your life will be one cloudless summer-day!"

"I hope it will; though something tells me I shall have my trials, like others: but do you not envy me, Margaret?"

"No; and I really hope all your expectations will be fulfilled. How much you will have to tell me when you

come back, Nora! I shall count upon quite a charming story when you return."

"I have determined to come back engaged," said Nora, decidedly; "and I shall have to tell you all about that. I am not going to be ridiculous, like Sibyl. There she was the belle of the season, and she danced, and dined, and rode, and picniced, and sang, and looked divine; and yet, as Tom says, all her suitors 'hang fire.' Elegant, isn't it? but still expressive."

"Has she had many lovers?"

"Well, she had had about a score of *beaux;* and once there was a sort of engagement, and I think it would have come to something, for the young man was very much in love. But one afternoon he came in unexpectedly, when she thought he was over the hills and far away,—and—what—do—you—think—he found her doing?"

"I cannot guess; not making pies, I suppose, or cleaning the kitchen-grate, or—?"

Or being amiable? No, nothing so feminine as pastry-making, or grate-cleaning. Charley Duchesne would have got over the flour-dredger and the rolling-pin; even the black-lead brushes would not have disgusted him so as to alienate his affections. Being a man of tolerable sense I am not sure that he would have cared at all. Margaret, look incredulous if you will, but I tell you the sober truth,—he surprised her in the act of *killing the cat!*"

"Do you mean it, Nora?"

"I do, indeed. Ask Fanny and Bella—ask Holly; *they* know about it: indeed, the poor animal was Bella's favourite, and regarded as her property. It was only last spring it happened, rather more than a year ago."

"What had poor pussy done?"

"She had killed and eaten Sibyl's bird, a piping bullfinch, that she made a great fuss about. It was Sibyl's fault: she left the cage where the cat could reach it, and poor Bully and naughty Pussy were accidentally shut up together. One cannot blame a cat for making a meal of a bird any more than we can blame each other for eating lamb and chicken.

It is a cat's nature to prey on mice and feathered things, and, as she caught and devoured birds in the garden and shrubbery, without being blamed or punished, how could she know—poor unreasoning quadruped!—that birds in cages were forbidden fruit? Sibyl came back from the promenade and went straight to her room. Puss, conscience-stricken, I suppose, when the deed was done, rushed out as soon as the door was opened, and there, upon the floor, lay the battered cage—the bullfinch had been dragged between the bars—and there lay feathers sprinkled with blood, and there lay poor Bully's beak! Sibyl vowed vengeance on the cat, but for nearly a week she was not to be found. Bella hid her somewhere, probably, till Sibyl's fury should have subsided. But one day Puss came back, evidently forgetting all about her misdeeds; she came in purring, and rubbing, and arching her back, and Sibyl quietly took her up and proceeded to put her threat in execution."

"How did she do it? I should not know how to kill a cat if I wished to take her life. Besides, they are so hard to kill with their nine lives."

"Sib went down into the stable-yard, where there is a large, deep tank kept filled with water. She put the poor beast into the water, and held her down by force of arm till she was dead. Of course, she was bitten and scratched finely; but she did not seem to feel it: she stood exulting in her revenge, her cheeks flaming and her eyes flashing 'like a beautiful fiend,' Charlie Duchesne said, for he came in just as the work of death was accomplished, and Sibyl was lifting the lifeless carcase from the water."

"Was she not vexed at his appearance?"

"I scarcely know, but this I do know—he was horrified; all his love seemed to turn to loathing, and he said, 'A girl who could deliberately, with her own hands, drown a cat for vengeance, would be very likely to commit a murder by-and-by.' I think he was right."

"*So do I!*" And, remembering how Sibyl hated me, I shuddered and felt afraid. I was glad to think she was going away in a day or two. For three or four months—for

they spoke of going to Brighton after the London season—I should be free from a presence that I began to fear as well as to avoid.

CHAPTER XXI.

LOST IN THE WOODS.

BESIDES Nora, I had now another unfailing friend at Crofton Lawn. I do not speak of Miss Hollingsworth who was ever my friend, though I sometimes repelled her with my proud, wilful ways and hasty speeches, but of Gussie, who, from being my torment, became my chief companion and staunch ally. She worked hard herself at her music, even condescending to practise scales and exercises vigorously, because I assured her they were essential to a free and brilliant execution; but her great delight was to throw herself on the hearth, and, with her hands clasped above her head, lie listening to my performance, whatever it might be. And as I never would play for her till all her lessons were properly prepared, I had now very little trouble with any of her studies.

After a while the habit of resistance seemed to die out, and she came as docilely to her school-room duties as the strictest disciplinarian could have desired; she began to take a real interest, first in one branch of study, then in another, till I was really surprised at her swiftness of comprehension, and at the rapidity with which she made certain kinds of knowledge all her own. As for nurse and Rebecca, they could not understand it at all; I must have bewitched the child, they said, since never before had she been amenable to authority of any kind. I had only to speak and to be obeyed, whereas in former times prayers and commands, reproofs, and cajoleries were alike ineffectual. So by degrees it came to be understood that Miss Gussie, having learnt to behave herself, as nurse said, like a Christian child, was free of the nursery; while Miss Hollingsworth signified her willingness to accept Gussie as *her* pupil, whenever it might be expedient. But I was not going to give up *my* pupil,

save at the sword's point of strenuous resistance and fierce conflict. I had made a conquest of this singular child: I had discovered her weak point, and had availed myself of it to reduce her to obedience, and also to win her confidence.

Besides, in having Gussie for my subject and devoted follower, my love of pre-eminence was gratified. Here was one person an insignificant person indeed, and a person in very bad odour with the community generally; but still a sentient human creature, with passionate likings and dislikings in her strange incomprehensible nature, who made me her sovereign, her guide, and, as time passed on, her idol! You may imagine how all this soothed and pleased me; it compensated for the lack of much that I had missed so long; it made me impervious to many a sharp rebuff, and heedless of many a scornful glance; it restored my self-complacency, which had almost died out from sheer starvation; it encouraged me to persevere in holding my head above water, and it kindled to a flame every spark of that latent ambition which had been smouldering in my bosom all my life. Gussie's unqualified allegiance, in the state of my affairs just then, was both a source of good and evil. On the one hand, it preserved me from sinking down into despondency, and from rushing away in mad despair from the injustice and positive miseries of my lot; on the other hand, it ministered to some of the most dangerous propensities of my nature.

It was a bright and beautiful summer, and Cotswoldbury was at its very fairest, when my aunt and cousins went away. The horse-chestnuts were in full blossom, the lilacs were all one purple glow, the hawthorn-bloom was in its prime, and the gay laburnum was weaving on the breeze its golden chains,—never had I seen trees in such perfection, for the country was not well wooded round about St. Eldred's, even at some distance from the sea. I loved to walk up and down the stately promenade, through the green aisle-like avenues, where the sunbeams came only faint and flickeringly, and along the quieter roads, where still the umbrageous elm, the large-leaved lime, and the stately sycamore flourished gloriously. Sometimes Miss Hollingsworth took us to the

Spaville-gardens, where, on certain occasions, an excellent brass band performed, and all the *élite* of Cotswoldbury promenaded in most elegant attire. But better than promenade or public gardens, better than tree-shaded road, or busy, bustling High Street, I loved the Woldscote Hills, with their rich-wooded slopes, their steep, flowery lanes, and their broad, undulating summits, stretching for many a mile far away north, south, and east, sometimes a barren waste, where only sheep could find a scanty pasture; sometimes thick, shrubby woods; sometimes little dales, wherein nestled pleasant homesteads and comfortable rick-yards, and sometimes broad fields of corn or stubble according to the seasons of the year; though this, I believe, was not the veritable Woldscote which is not amenable to cultivation. But everywhere on those breezy heights there was a magnificent prospect: first of all there was the wide-spreading Woldscote range itself, then there was the white Cotswoldbury town beneath, in a green well-watered plain, with here and there a village lying half *perdu* in a grove; beyond was the fruitful vale of the Severn, into which the stupid little Cote, mingling with the swifter Milscote-water, found its way; then there was another range of hills, grander far than ours, their peaks rising dark and jagged against the evening sky,—they almost deserved to be called mountains, and I counted them as such, till one day the veritable mountains upreared themselves before my enraptured gaze. And in teaching Gussie and in diligent study, in formal town walks and in wild country rambles, the quiet summer sped away, and when Fanny and Bella did not interfere with me I felt tolerably happy.

And all this time I was living without God in the world. There was no profession of religion in my uncle's house, Miss Hollingsworth being the only person in it who ever seemed to concern herself about another life than this. She, I am certain, was a humble, sincere Christian; but her views were not of the clearest, and she was extremely reserved, and seldom spoke of herself, or of her feelings, in any way. I found out afterwards that she was not a happy

Christian. In her heart, I believe she always clung to the one and only source of peace; but she was looking to herself also, trying in a certain puzzled, half-bewildered way to merit heaven. And so it came to pass that she seldom talked to me on spiritual subjects. We read the Bible with her every morning, and she explained it, with the help of a commentary, to the best of her ability. In all her intercourse with us, she conscientiously strove to make us what she called "good women;" and I am sure it was not her fault that I lived the life I did, altogether oblivious of the teaching of my earlier days, and as careless about vital religion as if no such thing existed.

As that summer advanced, I began to interest myself on the subject of botany. I had learned something from my father, and I had some of his books with me; but the flora of Cotswoldbury and its neighbourhood was a very different one from that to which I had been accustomed about St. Eldred's. I had learned nothing regularly, and now I set to work to acquire the first principles of the science, taking up the Linnæan system as being apparently simpler, and more easily studied without a teacher. Of course, I procured plenty of specimens, and then I tried to identify them by means of my treasured "Withering," which I possessed in four goodly volumes—the latest edition, too—with recent annotations; and it was to seek for certain plants that I first began to explore the wooded slopes and flowery heights of the Woldscote Hills. Miss Hollingsworth was not a good walker, and my cousins only laughed at me for rambling about in search of *weeds*, and gathering vulgar field-flowers, when I might have as many as I liked from a well-kept, well-stocked garden. They could not in the least comprehend my botanical *furore*, and sometimes Fanny would mockingly present me with a dandelion, and Bella would ask me to bring her home a bouquet of the finest sting-nettles I could procure, to be gathered with ungloved hands.

Now, I knew the choicest specimens must be sought for among the hills, and, of course, I could not go there unattended: and so there seemed to be an insuperable difficulty

in the way of my botanical research. But I was not one quietly to accept an apparent alternative; if I could not reach the desired goal by one road, I always tried another. I gloried in Hannibal and in Bonaparte for getting across the Alps in spite of every obstacle, and I was determined to get across the Woldscotes,—legitimately if I *could;* if not—well, *illegitimately.*

One evening I had been out to Cardington, and had not found the specimen I wanted, so I was more than ever set upon an expedition to the hills, where I knew the coveted *labiate* might be discovered. I went to Holly, who was sitting placidly reading, and regarding the sunset sky. I told her of my disappointment, and also of my determination to seek for the plant in the actual *habitat* where my "Withering" said it might be found.

"But, my dear Margaret," was her reply, "it is impossible that I can go with you to Ninnian's Wood; it is a four miles walk, eight miles there and back. I cannot do it, or I would go with you most willingly."

"I knew you would, Holly; but I would not have you tire yourself to death for all the flowers that Withering enumerates. Let me go by myself; I am used to lonely walks. Why, I have rambled about for hours at St. Eldred's without seeing any human creature, save perchance, a stray fisherman, and, I was going to say, a sea-gull, only gulls are scarcely human."

"That was a very different affair. You were then under the care of your own parents; you were younger, more of a child, people would call you a young woman now. Besides St. Eldred's was a solitary place, and Cotswoldbury in some respects is like London—in one respect, certainly—that no young gentlewoman can go out who has not a proper escort."

"I can take care of myself, Holly."

"I know you can, my dear. I can fancy those dark eyes of yours flashing a thousand furies should any one presume to take a liberty or advance one inch too far."

"It would be so, indeed. Why, then, may I not go and please myself?"

"Simply because I should be lacking in my duty to yourself and to your aunt did I permit you to expose yourself to injurious remarks. Conscious innocence and rectitude are grand things, my dear Margaret, but it does not do to defy the world."

"Oh, never mind the world!"

"You must mind it; but I am very sorry, child, that you should be disappointed. Perhaps I could get Rebecca to go with you for once in a way."

"But once in a way will not content me. I want to go to the hills twice or thrice a week at least while the long evenings last. What if I took Gussie?"

"That might do. I must think about it. It is simply the fact of your being unaccompanied that I could not permit. There is no real danger of any kind. I really think that if Gussie and you went together—trusting you as I do, Margaret, for a thoroughly steady, well-conducted girl—there could be no actual objection. But *will* Gussie go?"

"Trust her. She will go anywhere with me, and, besides, she is beginning to care about flowers; she is always asking me questions, and yesterday I found out that she had learned all the Linnæan classes and orders of her own accord. She wishes very much to gather some specimens for herself."

"Very well, then you and Gussie may go; only I cannot have you stay out late—you must promise me always to be in before dark."

"Of course. Thank you, Holly. Then that difficulty is removed."

And very glad I felt that Sibyl was from home; for she would certainly have put her veto on the whole proceeding had she been there to discover how completely I had set my heart on these botanising expeditions. As it was, no more hindrances arose, and the very next evening Gussie and I, with our baskets, went to a famous copse nearly four miles away, and returned betimes, to Miss Hollingsworth's satisfaction. After that, we made a similar excursion nearly every fine evening, till we began to know the country thoroughly, and were familiar with all its cross-ways and short-

cuts, and knew the intricacies of the wood-paths almost by heart. And the exercise did us good; the pure air blowing so freely across the open Woldscotes brought the roses to my cheek, and strength and energy to my frame; while Gussie's sallowness was relieved by a ruddy flush, and she was certainly a little plumper, and did not look so much like a miserable changeling. Indeed, when she was quite happy, seated at her beloved piano, or out with me, examining some new plant, her whole face lighted up with enthusiastic interest, and, her bearing gentle and docile, I thought she was no longer so very plain—if she went on improving thus, she might even grow to be passably good looking.

We thought we knew every turn and winding of those intricate lanes, which intersect each other all over the western and north-western slopes of the far-spreading Woldscotes; but one evening in August we found ourselves mistaken. The days were shortening now, and Gussie and I were required to return to Crofton Lawn by eight o'clock; so we took tea very early, and were generally afoot by five o'clock. This evening we set out even before the usual time, for I heard the clocks in the town striking five when we were far on our way to the woodlands where we expected to find our prizes; and it could not have been more than six when we reached the thick wild grove which filled a hollow beyond the summit of the particular hill we had ascended.

We rested there a little while, and then began to hunt for floral treasures; and so absorbed we were in the pursuit, and so delighted with the splendid specimens we secured, that the time flitted by unheeded; and it was Gussie who was at last awakened to a just perception of the state of things. She was sitting on a bed of colchicum, busily examining the petals of a very curious flower we had neither of us ever seen before, when suddenly she started up, exclaiming, "Cousin Margaret, it is getting dark!"

I looked at my watch—my dear mother's watch, which I always carried—and found that it was past seven o'clock, and that we must begin our descent immediately if we wished not to exceed our leave of absence; for it would take us

quite an hour, even at a rapid pace, to return to Crofton Lawn. "We must set out this instant, Gussie," I said. "No, never mind that sow-thistle; we will come again."

"But what makes it so dark?" said Gussie, peering upwards through the interlacing boughs. "It is dark enough for half-past eight. Is it going to rain, I wonder?"

"I fear there is a storm at hand; you know we heard distant thunder at noon, but it seemed to pass away. Let us make haste to get out of the wood."

We dashed along the path at tremendous speed, for it grew darker even while we spoke; we could scarcely see each other's faces, and large solitary drops pattered slowly on the leafy dome above us. Whether it was the gathering obscurity of the evening, or whether we were a little disconcerted, I cannot say; but certainly we missed our way, and, when at last we were clear of the trees, we found ourselves in a wide region of stubble-fields, sloping away on the opposite side from Cotswoldbury. The ground sank so much where we stood, that we could not possibly satisfy ourselves about our real position, and the heavy clouds and shadows of the coming storm hid from us all familiar landmarks that might have helped us in our predicament.

"Where are we?" said Gussie, quite despairingly. She was getting very tired, poor child, and she was afraid of tempests.

"I cannot think, Gussie. We have never been here before; we missed the turning somehow that would have taken us down into Chillingham-lane. If I could only see the rocky side of Millsbridge-hill, I should know where we really are. As it is, I cannot find out the points of the compass."

"I think we should go straight back."

"I think so too. We are looking over the Wolds now; our backs must be to Cotswoldbury: let us turn round and keep straight on till we are clear of the wood and see Cotswoldbury below us."

Instantly we suited the action to the word. There was not a moment to lose; the darkness deepened rapidly, and the rain began to fall heavily. But keeping straight in the

wood was no such easy matter, for what had been obscurity in the stubble-field was absolute blackness in the thickest part of the leafy covert, and we were puzzled wherever the path divided, or branched off we knew not whither. Again, however, we emerged from the grove, and again we were in a strange land,—in a long, shaded valley, sloping upwards to some more exalted height. It was pouring with rain now, and there were some faint flashes of lightning and pretty loud peals of thunder, and we agreed not to go back into the wood, but to ascend to the huge brow we saw before us to the left.

It was weary work, for we were sinking with fatigue, our clothes were dripping, and the long grass on which we had to walk was very wet; but on we plodded, scarcely saying a word, till at length, hot and breathless, we scrambled up the rocky paths, and found ourselves on the very top of a high hill, which we had never explored on account of its distance.

"It is Ashe Hill!" cried Gussie; "and there is Ashe End far away below us."

It was true: we had wandered farther and farther from home ever since we had missed the proper turning in the wood: now we were at least six miles from Cotswoldbury, the storm was increasing, and night was setting in; and, oh, what would Miss Hollingsworth think about us?

There was nothing to be done, however, but to proceed, and wearily we tramped down the miry lane that led us to the village of Ashe End. Even when we reached it we should be three miles from our destination. It ceased to rain after awhile, and the moon rose, and the thunder, which had never been very near us, rolled away, and we heard only inarticulate murmurs in the far distance; and on we plodded, desperately, silently, till suddenly Gussie sank down, declaring she could go no further.

I was very much in the same plight myself, so I sat down with her on the wet ground and consented to rest awhile, and, as we sat, feeling as if the exertion of getting up again would be an impossibility, we saw some one descending the hill towards us.

"It is the tin-box man," said Gussie.

We had seen this man,—this gentleman,—several times, and Gussie thought him very ugly, though I did not. He had plenty of obstreperous sandy hair, ditto beard, ditto whiskers; he was tall and rather gaunt, and he walked in tremendous strides, looking, Gussie said, as if he meant to go and eat somebody. As he approached us now I really thought he had the air of a bandit. But, summoning all my courage, I accosted him and explained our miserable position; and then I found I had to deal not with a bandit, but with a veritable gentleman. "My name is North," he said, courteously. "Will you rest awhile in my house, and I will send, or go myself, to Crofton Lawn and fetch the carriage for you? My wife will give you a hearty welcome. If you like to remain till morning she will readily accommodate you."

What could we do but thankfully accept this kind invitation? We would rest at Mr. North's house till the carriage came to take us home.

CHAPTER XXII.

THE PALACE OF CONTENT.

CHEERED by companionship and the prospect of rest, Gussie and I rose up to follow Mr. North, devoutly hoping his house might be at no great distance. But after stumbling on about a hundred yards, Gussie sank down again and began to cry. She was not at all strong, and the long fatigue and the fears excited by the storm, and by our strange position, had thoroughly exhausted her. She was positively so faint that she would have fallen prostrate on the wet, soaked path had not Mr. North suddenly abandoned his tin box and picked up the weary child in his long, strong arms, saying as he did so, "If you will let me, I will carry you, my child; for we have at least three-quarters of a mile to go: my cottage is about the last house on the other side of the village of Ashe End. There, nestle down and be

comfortable. Put your arm round my neck : I shall fancy it is my own little Hetty, who is about your size, I think."

Gussie thankfully availed herself of the proffered kindness, and we were about once more to resume our pilgrimage, when she suddenly lifted up her drooping head from the broad shoulder where it lay so confidingly, and exclaimed, "You have left the tin box behind!"

"No; it is here," I answered,—for I had lifted it up the moment after it was discarded in favour of the child. "I will carry it, Mr. North."

"Thank you; but I am afraid it is heavy. I know a safe nook where I can leave it till the morning,—I had forgotten my specimen case."

"Your specimen case?" inquired Gussie, rousing up. "Why, I thought it was a sort of candle box. Do *you* collect specimens?"

I could detect a tone of amusement in his voice as he answered, "Indeed I do! I have collected some thousands in my time. Now I may ask, do you also collect?"

"Yes," replied Gussie, seriously; "we get plants, and we find out their names, and all about them: Margaret is a great botanist."

I hastened to disclaim the flattering imputation, and assured Mr. North that I knew very little about the science, and that I was altogether baffled when I tried to understand the natural system.

"Then you keep your flowers in that tin box?" interposed Gussie. She was quite excited at thus unexpectedly solving the mystery of the tin box, which had perplexed us both not a little—for we had met Mr. North, as I said, several times—perhaps in all half-a-dozen times, and always he marched along at a great rate—as Gussie said, like an ogre smelling his supper five miles off; as I thought, like one of Ossian's ghosts—and invariably carrying with him this wonderful tin box. It was not painted or varnished, like the generality of collecting cases; it had a handle fixed to the lid, and it was carried in the hand, instead of being slung from the shoulder in orthodox fashion; and on the

whole it really was very like a huge candle box,—only, as Gussie said, "Why should any one carry candles about the woods and lanes? and if he went about to the villages selling candles, why didn't he take more with him, since this notable tin case could not possibly contain more than a couple of pounds?"

I suggested that the tin-box man, as we always called him, made rural expeditions on behalf of some Cotswoldbury grocer, and that he carried with him only samples of his stock, with a view to getting orders for his principal. But Gussie shook her head, and sagaciously determined that he was not *that:* he was very ugly; but he was a *gentleman!* While I was not so certain about his being a gentleman, but I did *not* think him ugly,—rather the reverse! No sooner, however, had I exchanged a few words with Mr. North, than I recognised in every tone and gesture the "gentle" element, and I knew immediately that I had to do with a man of no common stamp; and that evening Gussie recanted all she had ever said about her new friend's ugliness, and voted him "beautiful exceedingly!"

Mr. North explained that the tin box preserved the specimens fresh for drying, or for examination, and advised us to set up a case for ourselves rather than trouble ourselves with baskets; and he courteously proffered his assistance if we were in any doubt about our plants. We chatted pleasantly all the way down the miry hill, the fresh wind blowing in our faces, and the moon shining out clear and full in the now placid sky. Nevertheless, I was heartily glad when we came to a little gate, which Mr. North swung open, at the same time accosting some one who stood in the shadow of the flower-wreathed porch beyond—"Come back at last, mamma; and here are some visitors for you. You see as I had not Hetty with me I was obliged to pick up a child by the way. Allow me to introduce you to my wife, Miss Crofton."

I hastened to explain that I was only Miss Torrington, that Gussie was my cousin, and not my sister; and Mr. North responded—"Never mind; all the same thing: only

pray sit down and rest. Mary, my dear, these young ladies lost themselves in the woods, and have been out in the storm, —and they are wet, and hungry, and tired."

We were now in what seemed to be the family sitting-room A lamp was burning brightly, and the table was spread for supper, while books, and needlework, and several vases of wild flowers, most exquisitely arranged, gave an aspect at once home-like and elegant to the small and very plainly-furnished room. I looked at my hostess, and fell in love with her on the spot. I think I see her now, as first I saw her that night, sweet Mary North; one of the *wee*-est women, as wife and mother, I ever saw. Little taller than Gussie, and with a child-like innocence in her smile, I thought at first she was a mere girl; but looking a second time, I perceived that in very truth she wore all the honours of a matron. Dark ringlets shaded a fair, ingenuous brow, and soft, dark eyes lighted up one of the most perfect faces I had ever seen,—a face replete with truth, and purity, and love,—such a bright little sunbeam to shine upon any man's home and convert it by the subtle alchemy of womanly piety and true conjugal affection from a humble cottage into a fairy palace. Indeed, as I afterwards found, these dear people, to whom I was so singularly introduced, called their tiny house,—their very poor and shabby house, as it seemed to me, accustomed now to the magnificence of Crofton Lawn,—"The Palace of Content."

Little dreamed I, as I looked around me that first evening, and saw evidences of a very, *very* limited income—nay, evidences of what my elder cousins would have conceived to be the direst poverty—in the furniture and the whole aspect of the room in which we sat,—little dreamed I of the vast superiority of simple Maple Cottage—that was its real name I soon found out—over the magnificent and stately Crofton Lawn. "Better is little with the fear of the Lord, than great treasure and trouble therewith: better is a dinner of herbs where love is, than a stalled ox and hatred therewith." Ay; "better is a dry morsel and quietness therewith, than a house full of sacrifices with strife." And the law of

love and kindness was the law of Maple Cottage, *alias* "*the Palace* of Content," as Gussie and I soon learned to call it; while selfishness, pride, and fierce contention ever reigned at Crofton Lawn.

Mr. North soon set off to pay Miss Hollingsworth a visit, and, meanwhile, Mrs. North insisted on our making ourselves quite comfortable. In the first place, she proposed an adjournment to the kitchen, where there was a fire; then she brought us dry raiment, waiting on us with her own hands. In right motherly fashion she chafed Gussie's cold, damp feet and put on them a pair of warm socks, the property of the invisible Hetty, who, of course, was safe in bed; then she robed me in her own dressing-gown: and meanwhile the little servant had made us tea and toast, and boiled new-laid eggs on our behalf; and when our temporary toilet was complete, and our wet, draggled garments taken from our sight, we sat down, and enjoyed a right noble repast, and were comforted for all our troubles and disasters.

How pleasant it was in that cozy kitchen! how bright were the tins, and the round, ruddy face of the copper warming-pan! how clean the stone floor! how spotlessly white the hearth! how neat the array of common willow-pattern crockery-ware on the small, well-scoured dresser opposite the fire-place! The cloth that covered our tea-table was not of very fine texture, and my quick eye detected in it the cleverest and most artistic darns imaginable; but it was of snowy purity, and our little meal was as daintily served as if we had been eating and drinking out of silver and Sèvres china: I even caught a glimpse once of another kitchen beyond,—a mere cupboard with a sink in it, and stores of saucepans, and all the etceteras so needful in a household, which are nevertheless kept sedulously out of sight. But I could perceive that the same order and cleanliness reigned there as elsewhere. Mrs. North, I made up my mind, must either be a woman of wondrous "faculty," or she must be the mistress of a most invaluable maid. I rather inclined to the former supposition, since the little servant-girl, though perfectly tidy and even trim in her ap-

pearance, had not that air of refinement which is certainly essential to making not only the *most* but the *very best* of one's domestic wherewithal. Certainly Mrs. North was as clever as she was pretty; and as for her goodness and truth, one read it in every line and glance of her sweet, bright, speaking face.

Our tea being over, we sat before the fire and conversed: we told our hostess all the history and mystery of our adventure, and how it was that we were so suddenly precipitated on her hospitality. And she told us how her husband was wont to take long rambles in search of plants and insects, and how he went geologizing, and how he knew, or seemed to know everything worth knowing, how good he was, how kind, how clever, how altogether excellent beyond compare. Good little wife! she was as proud of her "William," as if he had been acknowledged on all hands the great man of the day.

"Does he know *all* the plants?" asked Gussie, in reverential wonder.

"Yes; all of them;—that is, all British plants. He is writing a book about them now. Besides, he is a great chemist, and an entomologist; and he knows more about geology than half the *savants* that the world listens to. You should see his drawings—his coloured diagrams, and his collections of specimens—plants, insects, minerals."

"And do *you* know it all, too, Mrs. North?" was Gussie's next inquiry. She was never afraid of asking questions, and she seemed wonderfully at home by the kitchen-fire at Maple Cottage.

"Oh, dear; no!" laughed Mrs. North. "I know very little,—only just enough to make me fully appreciate my husband's genius and acquirements; it is not necessary that we should both be wonderfully clever. I know small things in a small way only, and I am content. I cannot always understand him. It would be strange indeed, if I could; for if I, a woman, and a woman by no means highly cultured, could fathom the depths of his great mind, there might naturally arise a suspicion that after all there was not

so very much to fathom. But I can believe in him always, and love him as he deserves to be loved."

A few years afterwards, when that noble poem "In Memoriam" was given to the world, I thought as I read some of its stanzas, that Mrs. North might have sat for at least one of Tennyson's verse pictures :—

> "She knows but matters of the house,
> And he, he knows a thousand things.
>
> "Her faith is fixed, and cannot move;
> She darkly feels him great and wise;
> She dwells on him with faithful eyes.
> 'I cannot understand. I love.'"

Still, bonnie, winsome Mary North, you knew many things beyond "matters of the house." You had a passionate love for literature, though you never penned a line yourself, and you had no contemptible acquaintance with the books and authors of the day, considering how much of your time was necessarily consumed in making puddings and *réchauffés* of the remnants of yesterday's dinner, in mending little socks and frocks, and in turning and contriving generally, to say nothing of nursing incorrigible babies, who were never so good and never cooed so prettily as in their mother's arms! Certainly, you were born to be the wife of a poor *gentleman;* you would never have been happy mated with a wealthy churl or snobbish millionaire, who gave grand dinners to his friends, and gave to you tall footmen and diamonds, and—as much of his heart as he could comfortably spare!

"Who is Hetty?" asked Gussie presently. "The tin-box man—I mean Mr. North—said when he was carrying me along, 'I shall think you are my own Hetty.'"

"Hetty is our little daughter; she is ten years old, and she is just now where all little damsels of ten should be at this hour—safe in her own snug nest. And we have two little boys also—little Willy and the baby."

"Oh, I wish we could see the baby!" exclaimed Gussie.

"You shall see him, then," rejoined Mrs. North; "for I hear him stirring. Patty shall bring him down."

And accordingly baby was brought down, and he sat on his mother's lap, in his little nightgown, kicking his small toes about in the comfortable warmth, and eyeing us, the interlopers, very solemnly. Clearly he could not understand our being there, seated at our ease, in the very *penetralia* of the Palace of Content; but by-and-by he grew gracious, and laughed at us so knowingly that we laughed back again; and he began to be saucy, for he was at an age when piquant sauciness is a characteristic of babies, especially male babies, a year and eight months old; and we were all at high romps presently, and never heard a carriage drive up, and the garden-gate swing to, and were greatly surprised to hear Mr. North's voice in the sitting-room.

We immediately went to him, and there on the sofa sat Holly, looking as if she had been frightened and surprised out of her senses; and she kissed and scolded us by turns, and promised us that we should never more go botanising in the Woldscotes.

"Nay," interposed Mr. North, "you will permit them to go with me sometimes. I will take care they are not lost again; I will be answerable for their return at proper time; and, as I am the oldest botanist of the trio, I may, you know, be able to help them a little. Miss Torrington here confesses to a very partial knowledge of the science."

I replied that I believed I knew nothing accurately, and that I should be delighted to avail myself of his kind instructions, if Miss Hollingsworth would but consent. To which Mr. North replied, that he would *make* Miss Hollingsworth consent. He and she were very old friends, having been born in the same village, and having played together as children.

"I shall not need any 'making,'" returned Miss Hollingsworth, quite gleefully for her, the finding us all safe and sound in the house of her trusted friend seemed to have restored her spirits wonderfully. "There can be no reason why Mr. and Mrs. Crofton should object. Mr. Crofton *does* know you, I believe, William? I beg pardon,

Mrs. North; I forgot the lapse of years that separates those William-and-Hester days from the present time."

"Yes; Mr. Crofton knows me well. He condescends sometimes to patronize me a little; but—"

And here, remembering Gussie's presence, he came to a dead stop rather awkwardly, and his wife tried to help him out of the dilemma by saying, while she pulled his sandy locks, "And William is so proud—so incurably proud—that he hates being patronized by the great people. He will never get on, I tell him; he holds himself as grandly aloof as if he were a king. But he enjoys the patronage of the little people; so if you will bring these young ladies very often, Miss Hollingsworth, we shall feel indebted to you."

That night, when we were safe in our own room, Gussie crept out of her bed into mine, and, with her arms around me, whispered, "Oh, Margaret, are you not glad we are here again all right? It was dreadful in the wood. And how should we ever have got home before morning if the dear tin-box man had not found us? Are they not *nice*, Margaret—these Norths? We will go and see them every day, if we can, and I will be quite good now, and I shall love them and that little Hetty when I see her; but not so well as I love you, Cousin Margaret."

My arm was round her, and I pressed her more closely. Then she said, "Cousin, did you not think I was a very dreadful child when you first came?"

"I did, indeed, Gussie."

"And I was, too! Nurse and Rebecca used to say the devil had got right hold of me; and I really think he had. But do you know I believe I should not have been so horribly bad if I had had some one to love?"

"You had your mamma and papa, dear Gussie, and all your brothers and sisters."

"Ah! but *loving*—real, right, loving—is not in their way, you know. They all made me angry, and I tried to serve them out, and I made up my mind to hate you worse than anybody, and to lead you—oh, *such a life!*"

"I believe it, Gussie; but you do not hate me now?"

"You *know* I love you, Margaret; I do, and I will do everything you tell me. But, oh! didn't it seem nice in that little hut of a house? Holly said, as we were driving home, that the Norths were poor; I think they are *rich*."

"And I quite agree with you, Gussie. They have not much of this world's wealth, I fancy, but they are content with what they have, and they are rich in love, and peace, and knowledge of all kinds. Such a cottage as theirs is better than many a mansion."

That was the beginning of our acquaintance with Mr. and Mrs. North. Afterwards we—that is, Gussie and I—visited them frequently, and they became our dear and valued friends, and we loved them more and more as time went on.

CHAPTER XXIII.

TWO YEARS.

I MUST hurry over the events of the next two years, which passed tranquilly enough, inasmuch as very little happened that would interest my readers; though I must beg them on no account to suppose that my life at Crofton Lawn during that period was a placid one, or that I ever knew anything about keeping "the even tenor of my way." On the contrary, I was always like a person living on the slopes of Mount Vesuvius, who feels ever and anon the inward throes of the volcano, and constantly anticipates the fiery stream which is to scorch up his vines and olive-trees, and, perhaps, consume the vital current in his veins. No one in my uncle's house—save Gussie, and now and then by loud profession, Cuddie—really loved me; and in this retrospection of the past, which I am trying faithfully to record, I cannot but admit that much of my discomfort was distinctly traceable to myself. "Miss Torrington has such a spirit," nurse would say, when the news of some dire conflict and some fresh disgrace into which I had plunged was carried to her; and truly I had a

spirit, and a very evil spirit, of pride and obstinate self-will, accompanied by an amount of physical courage and actual daring very rare in a young girl. I scarcely knew what it was to be afraid. I verily believe that if they had locked me up in a dark garret, and fed me on bread and water, for a month, they would not have crushed this audacious spirit, or have made me change my mind or purpose.

But they did nothing of the sort; I ate and drank of the best daily,—creature comforts were not denied me, though I was always given to understand that I must not by any means suppose that I had a right to the same luxuries and amenities of life as my cousins—I was always to recollect that I was *not* a Miss Crofton! And though at first I was very unhappy about the state of my wardrobe,—as any young girl would be whose shabby dresses, already outgrown, stood little chance of being replaced,—fortune favoured me more in that particular than I had any right or reason to expect. My uncle returning to Cotswoldbury for a day or two on some special business,—an election, if I remember right,—saw my frayed crape, and shabby paramatta, more white now than black, in consequence of the chalky soil of the neighbourhood, and, after scolding me for going about so discreditably arrayed, he desired Miss Hollingsworth to go to the family draper and purchase for me all that I actually required. Which injunction dear, good Holly immediately obeyed, and in a short time I was provided with summer raiment suitable to my age and to my position; and shortly afterwards I found my dear mother's dresses began to be available, though I had always, during the whole of my residence at Crofton Lawn, to exercise the strictest economy, and to make every garment last as long as two, in order to present a respectable appearance in the household.

As I said, our intimacy with the Norths grew and prospered; and many an excursion Gussie and I took with the "tin-box man" over the hills and far away, in search of specimens; and by-and-by he began with all his might, and in his own peculiarly solid yet lucid fashion, to teach me structural botany. Strange to say, during the months in

which I visited them at Maple Cottage regularly, sometimes twice or thrice a week, Sibyl never really interfered to baulk me of this source of pleasure and improvement; while I, learning caution from many an unlucky *contretemps*, never talked about the Norths, or flourished my scientific acquisitions in the face of my elder cousins. Bella and Fanny still sneered at me, and once I feared, through Gussie's imprudence, and an outburst of her old provoking tricks, which she exercised now and then, though never upon me, or in my presence, that our cherished studies would be brought inopportunely to a close.

Gussie gathered a quantity of white archangel, or dead nettle, as it is sometimes called, and asked Bella and Fanny what it was. Like many older and wiser people, who are utterly ignorant of plants, and know only daisies and buttercups when they see them, the two girls declared them to be *nettles*—real sting-nettles. Gussie denied the assertion, and very learnedly explained the difference between *lamium album* and *urtica dioica*, going into the question of family and order pretty deeply, till her sisters bade her be silent and talk no more nonsense, and Bella added, "Now, just carry away your nasty nettles, for they *are* sting-nettles, and you know you are telling a heap of stories!—I suppose your darling Margaret put you up to them!"

Bella had a very exasperating way with her, I must confess. I never saw any one who surpassed her in sneering; and it takes a very sweet and even temper to endure sneers patiently. Now, poor Gussie's temper, though wonderfully amended, was naturally fierce and vindictive, and, irritated beyond expression by her sister's tone and looks, she sprang forward, thrusting her bouquet right into the face of Bella, declaring that she should find out for herself whether they were sting-nettles or no! And Bella, who really believed that she was going to be extensively and cruelly stung, sprang wildly from her seat, Fanny following suit, and Gussie, roused to her old goblin-fury, pursuing them. Bella stumbled. Down went a small table and Holly's desk, and a favourite flower-vase of Leonora's was shattered on the

instant. A scuffle ensued upon the hearth. There was a crash of china and a smashing of glass,—the chimney-piece was a desolation, and the school-room timepiece lay in the ash-pan. Finally Bella's dress caught fire, as, to avoid the fancied dangers of the nettles, she backed too closely to the grate. Then Gussie was frightened, and shrieks and lamentations filled the air, and Holly came flying from her own chamber just in time to prevent disastrous consequences. She commanded Bella to lie down, and seizing the hearth-rug and the baize table-cover, succeeded in smothering the flames, at the expense of her own hands, which had to be bandaged up for days. Bella fainted when all was over, and Fanny went into hysterics; Holly was moaning with the pain of her poor, blistered hands;—altogether, there was a scene, and a terrible scene, too, and it was reported downstairs by Eliza that Gussie and I had thrown Fanny into fits by flinging *archangels* at her, and had set Bella on fire, and dreadfully burnt Holly,—a marvellous report, which no one understood, but which nevertheless brought father, and mother, and elder sisters to the scene of action, and of course Gussie was whipped and sent to bed, and I was threatened with all kinds of pains and penalties for aiding and abetting her in her mischievous impertinence, though I was at the other end of the house when the affray occurred, and I did not even know that Gussie had gathered the white archangels, which grew plentifully in a corner of the orchard. We were both commanded never to speak about plants or flowers again, save in the ordinary way; but luckily no one thought of actually forbidding our botanical studies, and it never occurred to any one to couple Mr. North's name with the absurd *fracas* caused by two ungracious girls and a naughty child.

However, I could not help demonstrating on the spot the truth of Gussie's statement, and I took up the scattered dead nettles, or archangels, and, by burying my face in a handful and whipping my hands and arms with them, proved to my aunt and to Sibyl how perfectly innoxious they were. They were greatly astonished, and my aunt at length ven-

tured to touch a leaf or two herself, and, finding no evil result, proceeded to handle them freely, and to scold Fanny and Bella for being so ridiculous.

Gussie told Mr. North all about this extraordinary *mêlée*, expecting that he would laugh with her; but he looked grave, and finally told her, to her no small discomfiture, that "she had disgraced science;" and that if she could not pursue her botanical studies, and cultivate kindness and lady-like deportment at the same time, the sooner they were abandoned the better. "For," added he, in conclusion, "it were better that you should not know a dandelion from a daisy, than that you should be rude and insulting to your sisters. The possessor of true science, remember, Gussie, is always modest, humble, and invariably courteous."

And Gussie was really penitent and ashamed, and, to the infinite astonishment of her family, owned herself in the wrong, and begged pardon of Bella, who grudgingly accorded it.

The influence of the Norths told more upon Gussie than upon me. She was very fond of Hetty North, and Hetty was gentle, docile, and affectionate, and, while always seeming to give way, she was, unconsciously to herself, moulding anew her friend's character. Gussie perceived quickly enough the loveliness of obedience and unselfishness. The atmosphere of love that pervaded the Palace of Content seemed strangely to agree with her. There were no contentions at Maple Cottage, no cruel words like stabs, no oblique thrusts, no taunts, no tyrannical dictation on the part of the heads of the house, no insubordination, no fretful, querulous complaints on the part of the juniors. All was peace, harmony, and sweet content in that quiet, humble home, where God was feared, where Christianity was *lived*,—not talked of only,—where purest love abounded, whatever else was lacking. And of this world's pleasant things many, alas! were missing, albeit Mrs. North was as clever a manager as ever combined household thrift with amiability and elegance of mind.

But I am rather outrunning the course of events. The

affair of the "archangels" happened in November, and "the family," after a brilliant season in London, and at Brighton, had returned to Cotswoldbury in October. Late hours and heated rooms had told on Sibyl's beauty, and the sea-breezes had not restored the delicate bloom and freshness she took with her to town. Moreover she was thinner than heretofore; a haggard, cross expression began to show itself habitually, a sort of *soured* tone pervaded all her intercourse with her own family, and even with strangers she was peevish, and apt to lose her temper. In short, Sibyl Crofton had "gone off," as people say; at twenty years of age she looked faded, worn, and *passée;* and again she returned to the country *unengaged.* It was quite another thing with Nora; she had greatly improved, and she came home radiant with health and happiness. If the toils of her first London season had ever impaired her beauty, the Brighton breezes had brought back every charm, and heightened them in some inexplicable way; for certainly she was lovelier now than when she said "good-bye" in early summer, and she had infinitely distanced Sibyl in the article of *looks.*

She soon told me her secret, which was, indeed, no secret at all: she was engaged to a certain Captain Druce, with her father's consent, and to the delight of her mother, who was chagrined at having her eldest daughter, who had been voted such a *belle,* still on her hands. It is by no means to be admired or commended, this anxiety on the part of matrons to secure eligible—that is to say, wealthy and well-born—matches for their daughters as soon as ever they quit the school-room; but there was certainly some little excuse for Mrs. Crofton, with eight daughters on her hands—two already "out," and two more who expected to come out next year, provided one or both of the elders would be good enough to marry, and leave room for them; for my aunt had frequently said, "She never would go out with four unmarried daughters in her train." It may be imagined, then, how greatly her heart was cheered, and how rejoiced Fanny and Bella were at the news of Nora's engagement; but poor

Sibyl was bitterly chagrined, and Tom unfeelingly told her that she had got the veritable old-maid style, and had better resign herself to her fate.

Another day he would tell her she must lower her expectations, and be content to marry some rich old man, who would throw his medicine bottles at her when he had the gout,—like our neighbour Admiral Delany,—and leave her a heap of money when he died! Tom was very random, and he and Sibyl were chronically at feud, and he cared not what he said, provided he could really tease her, and, as he elegantly phrased it, "put her monkey up."

"I can't think how you manage it, Sib!" he said one day in my hearing, when the cloud on her face was darker and heavier than usual. "Here is Nora going to be married in February to the man of her choice,—to a handsome fellow, with lots of tin, and a pedigree that proves him to be descended, through lots of royal Cymri, straight from Arthur and all previous Pendragons! I shall be proud to call him brother, I can tell you. Nora is a regular brick; but then, you see, Sib, she has something like a decent temper: she can be a bit tart sometimes, but, on the whole, she is a very jolly girl, though *you* do put her up awfully occasionally! Now, I don't think there is a chance of Captain Druce coming in promiscuously some day, and finding her *drowning the cat* with her own fair hands!—eh, Sib? How was it the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals did not bear down upon you I wonder?—for all Cotswoldbury knew of your unfeminine performance,—the place was ringing with it, you know, and it's not forgotten now! Next time you wilfully murder a poor, dumb animal, I shall turn informer: I'm always short of the needful, and a sovereign is a sovereign! You see, Sib, my dear, people know you are—well! not exactly *meek;* and that is why the men don't propose; they see it in your face,—there is termagant and shrew written in every line of it. If you were engaged again, it would be *no go!* The fellow would find you out, unless you were betrothed one day and married the next. Heyday! what's the matter?"

For poor Sibyl had risen, choking with indignation, and, with tears streaming down her cheeks, and audible, convulsive sobs, had rushed from the room. I pitied her, and felt disgusted with my cousin Tom; for, truly as he spoke, he had no right to insult and irritate his sister; and taunts and unkind sarcasms will never cure even a slightly unamiable temper. If he wished to turn Sibyl into something worse than a veritable vixen, he could not have chosen more admirable tactics. I often wondered that he did not drive her actually insane; for where there is a furious, unbridled temper, I always suspect an incipient tendency to that most terrible of human maladies—insanity! Well said the ancient writer—

"Ira furor brevis est."

Captain Druce came down at Christmas; and we all liked him save poor Sibyl, who irrationally hated him. "He was the husband for Miss Nora," all the servants said; "he was just as kind-hearted and free-spoken, and just as open-handed. And he was as handsome as a picture. And they would make a lovely couple,—bless them, and send them every happiness!" "But," was nurse's comment one day, when I was in her territories, "I do wish it had been Miss Crofton. It's hard for her to see herself passed by and her younger sister married before her; and we should have quite a peaceful house comparatively if she were gone, now that you have tamed Miss Gussie, Miss Margaret."

And very quickly, as it seemed to me, the wedding-day drew near, and all the house was in bustle, and bridal attire was scattered about in every room, and wedding presents were pouring in, and every hour brought some fresh excitement, and I,—yes, I,—who had never hoped for so much happiness and honour, was chosen to be one of seven bridesmaids.

It was all Nora's doing. When she proposed that I should act in conjunction with Sibyl, and the twins, and the three pretty, sparkling Miss Druces, the gallant Captain's sisters, Mrs. Crofton had at once decided that it could not be. She thought—not unjustly, either—that the distinction would

increase my natural pride and enhance my self-complacency; it would also bring me forward in a very undesirable manner, and give me notions little suited to my prospects. Sibyl was furious at the very mention of such a thing,—"Such a senseless, strange idea, and not for one moment to be entertained!" Indeed, if I figured as bridesmaid, Miss Crofton would withdraw.

And Nora, having conquered her mother, in virtue of her position as bride-elect, to whom nothing could be denied, quietly told her sister she could do as she pleased: she intended me to be a bridesmaid, and she had told Captain Druce so, and he expected it, and thought it quite the thing, and I was to be paired with Maggie Druce, his pet sister,—the two Margarets together,—and we were to be dressed exactly alike, with daisy-wreaths in our bonnets in compliment to our name. And if Sibyl were *not* first bridesmaid, as had been arranged, all the world would know why she declined the office, which was her natural right, and her character for unamiability would be spread far and wide.

In the end, Leonora carried her point, and, for the first time since she arrived at woman's estate, Sibyl quietly succumbed; only she never spoke to me, and looked thunder and lightning at me whenever our glances met. I dreaded what might happen when the Captain had carried off his bride; for Nora had been my shield and protection in many a turbulent passage with her sister.

In due time the wedding-day arrived, and our beautiful Nora left the home of her childhood for new and untried scenes. She was very happy,—rather should I say, very *light hearted;* for, though I did not then discriminate very closely, I have since, on reflection, inclined to the belief that her feelings were scarcely deep enough for true happiness. She was one who never made a care, and, if she could help it, never encountered one. She lived in the sunshiny present, and never troubled herself with any forebodings of a future not so bright and warm. Her husband in this respect was well enough suited to her, for he too was content to take things as he found them, and he never

concerned himself about anything that promised to give him pain. I wondered then that two young things, loving each other certainly, and very sincerely too, should seem so carelessly light, so occupied with trifles, when about to pledge their troth irrevocably in the sight of God; and I wonder more, now that I recognize to the full the solemn import of the vows they made, and the momentous nature of the obligations with which they charged themselves.

And as I stood in the old parish church that bright February morning, in my pale grey silk, and my wreath of daisies, with the other Margaret at my side, unbidden tears filled my eyes, though the bride shed none, nor did she ever turn pale, or falter in her responses. I think I see it now,—that old church, with its hideous tiers of galleries, and the bridal train sweeping up to the venerable altar, where so many brides, long since laid in dust, had pledged their vows; I see again my uncle, handsome, stately, stern; my aunt, all smiles and tremors, fairer and stouter than ever, a heap of rich brocaded silk and Brussels lace,—the light falling on some silvery threads that were beginning to streak her paly-golden hair; Sibyl, flushed, and evidently ill at ease, looking, when the shifting beams fell full on *her* face, scarcely younger than her mother; the twins, prim and demure, and elegantly dressed, and their younger sisters, Eliza and my Gussie, who were not bridesmaids, standing a little apart; the bridal pair, the centre of that splendid group; the officiating clergymen—for there were two; the young groomsmen, foremost among them my cousin Tom, who had fallen fathoms deep in love with Agatha Druce, the tallest and most queenly bridesmaid of them all; and a crowd of other personages, friends or kindred of the bride and bridegroom; and, looking back, the whole church filled with people of all ranks and all ages,—a gaping, wondering, admiring host, come to see Miss Leonora Crofton married.

It was soon over: the blessing was pronounced; the Captain's mother, Lady Mary Druce, stepped forward and saluted her new daughter-in-law, which seemed to be the signal for Nora to be kissed in extremely miscellaneous

fashion; the books were signed, and the marriage handsomely attested; the officials feed; and we went back to Crofton Lawn, where a sumptuous breakfast, laid for sixty persons, awaited us.

An hour or two later Nora and her husband left for Paris, and in the evening we had a grand ball, and long before the dancers were tired I was glad to steal away to my quiet attic, where Gussie was sleeping placidly. I was thoroughly worn out, and glad that weddings only happened now and then; and, idly wondering whether I should ever have one of my own, I fell asleep, with the music of the "Caledonians" still sounding in my ears.

Everybody was cross next day, and for a week after; and it seemed as if the family could never be at rest again: but in time we all subsided into the ordinary routine, and in May the heads of the house, with Sibyl and the twins, went up to London. And, to every one's profound astonishment, Fanny, scarcely a year my senior, and far inferior in looks and talent to her elder sisters, never returned as a Miss Crofton, for she married from her father's house in town at the conclusion of the season. After that, we all began to think Sibyl quite an old maid.

All that summer I saw the Norths continually, and I worked hard at languages and at my music, and another winter and another summer came and passed, and Nora and Fanny both had babies, and Bella married and went out to India, and my aunt grew stouter and Sibyl thinner day by day. And at last my eighteenth birthday approached, and something told me changes were at hand.

CHAPTER XXIV.

GOING SHOPPING.

I WAS standing at my bed-room window looking out over the familiar prospect. How strange it had all seemed to me when first I came to Cotswoldbury nearly three years

ago! how changed from the wide horizon I had gazed upon ever since first I could remember! how different the scene! how limited the view, enclosed as it were in that great, sweeping framework of the hills that shut out all the world beyond! Then I thought I should for evermore hate Cotswoldbury; I felt as if it were impossible to be only moderately happy away from my own broad waters of the sea, whose deep, grand music sounded in my ears for many and many a day after I had travelled inland.

But as time passed on I came to love the hills, and, though I had never seen salt water since I left St. Eldred's, I left off pining for it. And now, in the glowing August day, how fair it looked! and how like a silent friend was nearly every point of the bright landscape!—and yet not silent either. Nature has never been voiceless to me; every wood, every brow of hill, every ravine where I knew the springs were trickling through the flowery turf, had spoken to me in its own sweet, mystic language.

But even as I gazed, I was wondering how long it would be ere I left the shadow of the Woldscotes. One more week, and I should have completed my eighteenth year; and I had resolved from the first, that when that time arrived, I would, if possible, free myself from the fetters which a life of dependence imposed. They need not so often have reminded me, that I was not a Miss Crofton—not a daughter of the house, born to luxury and pride, and a life of fashionable idleness—I never forgot it; I always remembered who I was, and what I was, and looked forward, sometimes eagerly, to the period when I should go into the world to carve out my own fortunes, to be my own mistress, to play my part in the great drama of life that is being ceaselessly enacted.

That morning had been a stormy one. I had offended my aunt—justly offended her, I must confess—and she had reproached me, as she often did, with "black ingratitude;" she had recapitulated all the benefits that had been showered upon my thankless head ever since I came to live at Crofton Lawn, and she had enumerated all my sins and my short-

comings, giving me credit for not a few imaginary faults which I never had committed. Then Sibyl had insulted me in the presence of the footman, and that functionary, new to the place, had absolutely grinned at me as he left the room. Last of all, Holly had told me that she was going to leave; her services were no longer required, Mrs. Crofton said. The elder girls were married; Jessie became every year a more confirmed invalid, and she lived now for the most part in her own room, with a maid devoted to her service; Eliza was to be sent to a fashionable boarding-school; and there would only be Gussie and little Rosa, now nearly six years old, who would require a governess. And so Miss Hollingsworth, being what is called a "finishing governess," and commanding always a high salary, became an unnecessary expense; and, perhaps, as regarded Rosa, it was true enough; but Gussie, though only twelve years old, was as sensible and womanly in many ways as Bella and Fanny had been when they married; and, when contrasted with Eliza, the younger sister was by far the cleverer.

"But Margaret would do very well for Gussie and Rosa for a couple of years yet," Mrs. Crofton had averred; and, stung now with that lady's sarcasms, and exasperated by Miss Crofton's taunting insolence, and annoyed by disrespectful servants, I was taking counsel with myself as to the desirability of falling into the plan thus arranged without any reference to my own opinions. I was tired, too, of Crofton Lawn—tired of its injustice, tired of its hollowness, tired of everything and everybody in it save and except Gussie—and Holly, who in a few weeks' time would say Good-bye to it for ever. I felt that I was stagnating—not exactly in a calm, for *breezes* were springing up around me every hour—and I wanted to go on my way, to spread my own sails, and speed on the voyage on my own responsibility; for it seemed to me not as if I were in the glittering land-locked bay again, but rocked for ever on the wrathful waves of some black, lonely pool, always driven hither and thither by adverse blasts, but never coming to the outlet. Oh, to be free! to cast aside

the shackles of my lot. My soul panted for freedom; for "freedom and a crust were better," I told myself, "than the luxuries of Crofton Lawn and slavery."

I began to take stock of myself and of my acquirements. I was nearly eighteen years of age, a tall, healthy, well-developed girl. I had plenty of spirit—bravery enough for half-a-dozen women! Also, I had pride enough, I flattered myself, once free of Crofton Lawn, to freeze up all impertinences offered to a young and unprotected woman. I could hold my own: I was not afraid of anything; I had a moderate share of good looks, I believed, but I was not handsome enough to attract many unwelcome admirers—and Holly had often told me that men in their sober senses rarely venture on a liberty with a girl who is true to herself, and keeps intact her womanly self-respect and maiden's dignity. And, on the whole, Holly was right enough, though I am constrained to admit that there are men base enough, contemptible enough, to count every girl "fair game" who falls in their way with only her own purity and strength of purpose to defend her.

But, looking on the sunny hills that August day, I feared no future ill; I wanted no champion to pick up the gloves that I might possibly fling down in the lists of life. I wanted only my freedom; I wanted to be in the world, not in the dull school-room; I longed to be on my own footing to be able to dare and do, to venture, and, of course, to win! You would laugh if I were to tell you all the ambitious dreams that thronged my brain as I contemplated at the same time the landscape and futurity!—that is, futurity as my vanity and my sanguine fancy painted it!

Then I began to appraise my capabilities. I *could* teach music now, there was no doubt about it, for I had taught Gussie to play brilliantly; but then Gussie was a musical genius, and learned as fast as I could teach; and as for compositions, I must candidly confess that hers, in point of excellence and originality, exceeded mine. I knew, also, that my own performance was something not to be despised, and my voice, which I had been told nearly three years

before was "magnificent," was very much improved and strengthened. I had taken my master's advice, and let it rest; I had not touched the book of exercises and difficult solfeggios for two years—I had only sung hymns in church and easy ballads of small compass at home; and now I was repaid by finding myself possessed of a power that fairly astonished me when first I began to try what I could do.

"Yes," said Mr. Scott; your voice is one among a thousand, Miss Torrington. It is strong and full, yet strangely sweet and ringing; it has a flexibility about it, too, such as I have rarely met with. You have a splendid organ; take care of it, and you may do anything with it."

"What do you mean by 'anything?'"

"I mean that you may aspire to almost any difficulty of execution; I know of no soprano solo in any oratorio that you might not attempt. I may say the same of operatic studies. Then your expression is so good; there is so much pathos in your singing. Now, Miss Crofton—"

"Never mind Miss Crofton, please. But tell me, Mr. Scott, would my voice gain me a respectable living?"

"It would do that to-morrow, if you were properly introduced. In a year or two, if rightly used, it would make your fortune. You might be one of the queens of song—you might make for yourself a world-wide reputation."

"Enough. If ever I write to you to recommend me to any situation in which my vocal and instrumental ability may tell, will you do me the service I request of you?"

"Of course I will; but, Miss Torrington, that will never be."

"It is impossible to say what will be; I have a presentiment that in twelve months from this time I shall be working for my bread. You forget that I am not a daughter of this house."

Mr. Scott looked kindly at me. "My dear young lady, I trust you are not contemplating any rashness. I hope I have said nothing that may tempt you to imprudence. It is quite true that your voice and your musical talents would be

invaluable were you cast upon the world; but there are other things to be considered. You would need influence—proper patronage—or you, with your inexperience, might fall into designing hands. You are impetuous, too, Miss Torrington—enthusiastic and impulsive—and you are so young and—forgive me—fair to look at! I should fear for you making your way alone in the great world."

But I did not fear for myself. Mr. Scott was an excellent music-master, but he was timid, and "Safe and sure" was his policy, rather than "Nothing venture, nothing win!" This was the reason, doubtless, why, with his rare genius and blameless character, he was still *only* a provincial music master. He had told me what I wished to know, and I was content. As for the "other things" at which he hinted, I did not concern myself about them; I *could* work now for my own lodgings, board, and raiment, and work I would without much more delay. I spoke French tolerably, and I could read Italian better than my cousins. My Latin I had not forgotten, or I could soon rub it up again. Thanks to early teaching and to Holly's sound tuition, I had been grounded in what are called "the branches of a solid English education." I could appreciate the best literature; and I fancied, though I never thought much about it, that prose composition was not my weakest point. Then, for a girl, my botany was something special; even Mr. North admitted it. And from him I had gleaned some geological facts, and I had dabbled just a little in chemistry and entomology. Also, last, but not least, I was a clever needlewoman, and I could make a dress, and decently contrive a bonnet to look prettily, to say nothing of the mysteries of cutting out, darning, and embroidering generally. And in no vain-glorious spirit I counted up these qualifications: I simply viewed them as so much material out of which were to be spun and woven the web of my own fortunes. *They* were to make the sails which were to float me joyously across the main. They would be at once the swelling canvass, the streaming pennons, the trim rigging, and the ballast of the ship, wherein I, Margaret Torrington, should sail away

triumphantly to fame, and pleasure, and to happiness, yet undefined, but perfect and soul-satisfying!

Ah, yes! the land-locked bay, and the dreary lake left behind, I should make the voyage of life in earnest!

So I resolved that I would wait till my eighteenth birthday should have passed, and then I would speak out, and tell my uncle plainly that I had resolved upon a change. I would thank him for all the benefits I had received from him, and at the same time declare my intentions, which were grounded on the basis of independence. I would also ask him for some portion of my small patrimony, not, however, with any hope of obtaining it, since I felt sure that, as he would strenuously oppose my determination, he would hold fast every penny of my little fortune till the law declared me my own mistress. And in all these conclusions I never wavered: it never occurred to me that I might make grand mistakes; I never suspected my own prudence; and I am afraid I sadly confused impatience of control with love of independence. Above all things, I never asked God to guide me in the paths I was about to tread; I did not commit my way to Him; I never sought His blessing or implored His presence. Self-confident, wilful, ignorant of the world, ambitious, and of a passionate, enthusiastic nature, I was about to launch out into the wide and troubled ocean with no pilot at the helm, no chart to point the way.

That summer no one went up to town, and the London house was let or lent for the season. Mrs. Crofton did not wish to go on her own account, and Sibyl cared not to provoke remark by exhibiting her faded charms on the arena of her former triumphs, or to be congratulated on the marriage of her younger sisters. There was a talk of going to the seaside in September; but I felt sure I was not to be included in the party.

I came down at last, for it was time to give Gussie her music-lesson; then came the school-room dinner, and, while we were still intent upon our lamb and late peas, Sibyl came in, as she sometimes did, to take her luncheon at our table.

"Margaret," she said presently, when she had helped her-

self to the nicest slices the joint afforded and grumbled that all the best was gone, "you must go to Upping's this afternoon. I want that checked muslin matched, and mamma says you are to order some *de-laines* to be sent up to choose from. We shall be wanting light autumn dress for next month. Also you must go to the library and ask why they have not sent that third volume of the last new novel. You had better go as soon as you have finished your dinner."

It was scorchingly hot, and I should have preferred waiting another hour or two; but I knew it would be in vain to urge *my* inconvenience on Sibyl; and till the time for action arrived I did not care to provoke her to any excess of hostility. I simply replied that I would do as she desired.

"And pray go steadily down the Promenade, Margaret. I must tell you that you have been remarked once or twice."

"In what way?"

"In a way not very flattering to yourself, in a way that might compromise *us*. You have been followed more than once!"

"I could not help that, foolish young men always will run after girls when they see them unprotected. They mean no harm, possibly, but it is very unpleasant; and really the young men of Cotswoldbury seem to have nothing to do but to stroll about the gardens, or up and down the Promenade, or about the pump-rooms, staring at girls and women, and quizzing those they call 'the frights,' and insulting by their notice those they consider pretty."

"If you do not seek to attract this objectionable notice, you will not be annoyed."

"That is not true, Sibyl. The empty-headed creatures on the Promenade are utterly regardless of decent ceremony: they only think of amusing themselves; and a little difficulty in their way is only an exciting stimulus. But pray be easy on my account; no one, save those whom I have met in this house, ever presumes to speak to me or to loiter by my side; and as I dislike the Promenade from two to five, un-

less I am properly accompanied, I shall go round by Park-road and the Chesnut Avenue, and so avoid the thronged resort. It will be hotter, but preferable on many accounts."

"You will take the children with you?"

"I shall take Gussie certainly, she is generally my companion; but I must decline the charge of Rosa: she gets tired so easily, and I do not choose to carry her as if I were a nursemaid; besides, she is troublesome in a shop."

Sibyl said a few sharp words about my insolence and my independent spirit; but she did not press the matter, for which I was truly thankful, since I was resolved not to be troubled with the child, whose proper attendant was nurse or Rebecca, and I meant even to refuse to go out shopping at all if she was thrust upon me; but I was glad to be spared a contest in which it would cost so much to prevail. About three o'clock Gussie and I put on our bonnets, and set off for Upping's in the High-street.

Now "Upping and Son" were drapers, and for some reason or other my uncle insisted upon all the custom of his house being given to them; and he even declared he would not pay bills sent in by "Cavendish and Co.," who kept all the Paris *modes*, and all the novelties of the London season. This was very annoying to my aunt and her daughters, for Upping's trade, though eminently respectable, was quiet, and not particularly *recherché;* at least, not in those days, when the business was very much with country folk, and when fairy robes and elegant tissues had to be ordered if they were wanted. Still, everything at Upping's was the very best of its kind, you paid a good price, and you had your money's worth in the article you purchased; and even Mrs. Crofton confessed that in linens, prints, and calicoes they were unrivalled. Nevertheless, she would have liked to have had an account with Cavendish and Co., and she made up for the restriction by running up tremendous bills in town.

I was busy looking over a heap of *de-laines*, and selecting such as I thought might be sent on approval, when I heard a voice that sounded familiarly in my ears. Mr. Upping,

senior—a dear old man with white hair—was serving me; and his son—a fair young man, just come into the business—was leaning over the counter, talking earnestly to another young man, who did not seem to be a customer.

I glanced at them, but the stranger's back was turned to me; he was tall, of athletic build, with a gentlemanly, not to say aristocratic, air. He was evidently young, and he seemed to be talking familiarly with James Upping; and as his laugh—almost a boyish laugh—rang out freely but not loudly, I had a vision of St. Eldred's, of the rising tide, and of the creek where long ago the "Little Gipsy" generally lay.

Again I listened: the voice was deepened, and the accent was quite pure; but surely—surely it was Gilbert Tredgold who was talking to James Upping! In another minute all doubt was at an end; he turned, and I saw his face—the face of my first friend. He saw me, too, and sprang forward, seizing both my hands: "Miss Margaret! is it possible?"

Upping and Son were both forgotten while we exchanged greetings; indeed, it was difficult now to give my attention properly to the business entrusted to me. Gilbert was staying in Cotswoldbury, for Mr. Saunderson was ordered to drink the waters; finally, he left the shop when we left it. I forgot all about Sibyl's muslin and the missing volume from the library; and he walked home with us right up to the gate of Crofton Lawn; but I did not dare to ask him in.

He had scarcely turned away, when Sibyl pounced upon me, and saluted me with, "A pretty thing, indeed! No wonder we like the Chesnut Avenue better than the Promenade. Promenade-flirting must be done openly and above-board; we can do as we like under the limes and the chesnuts, cannot we? But this shall be attended to, Miss Torrington; we are not going to be compromised for the sake of a country doctor's daughter, whose mother happened to be a Crofton! Such an example for Gussie, too! Ah, you prudish, demure young ladies know how to manage! I see—I see it all, Miss Margaret Torrington!"

CHAPTER XXV.

"WHAT DOES IT MEAN?"

I WAS so confounded that I knew not what to reply, and I hastened into the house, and upstairs to my attic, that I might sit down, and think over the charges that Sibyl had brought against me. And as I thought, my brains seemed to clear themselves wonderfully, and I began to perceive that I had done nothing which merited rebuke; and finally, I resolved that I would defend myself, and not be afraid of Sibyl Crofton any longer. I had not much time to reflect upon the course I would pursue, for the bell was ringing for the school-room tea; and I had only leisure to throw off my bonnet and mantle, which I had quite forgotten to remove, before the second bell sounded, indicating that the others were waiting for me.

I hastily smoothed my rumpled hair, and, looking in the glass, saw that my cheeks were crimson; then I ran down, and found, as I expected, Holly at her post, and Gussie and Dina in their usual seats. Holly looked searchingly at me as I sat down, and then I knew that she had been told—of my walking up the Chesnut Avenue with a young man whom nobody knew! She was very grave and preoccupied, and scarcely a sentence was exchanged between us while we were at table. Eliza glanced at me now and then, and giggled and simpered; so I felt sure that she had been informed of my delinquencies: probably the housemaid knew, and the cook, and by this time the kitchen-maid, and all the other servants, indoors and out, including, of course, the saucy footman who had laughed at me in the morning. Gussie wore a puzzled air; she had witnessed my meeting with Gilbert Tredgold, and she had listened to every word of our conversation, chiefly about St. Eldred's and the old times on the shore, and she really failed to perceive the enormity of my offence. I struggled to be, as well as to appear, brave, and I kept telling myself that I need not be discomfited—I

had only to tell my aunt who the objectionable young man really was, and in common justice she would acquit me of all the charges Sibyl brought against me. And there was Gussie, who could testify to the unexpected *rencontre* in Upping's shop. Ah! but could I hope for "common justice?" Should I not be tried and condemned without judge, counsel, or jury—without even being permitted to plead my innocence? There is a common saying that "One man may steal a horse with impunity, while another man is hung for looking over the hedge." And Sibyl and Leonora had had *beaux* innumerable—and by *beaux* one meant, in Cotswoldbury parlance, danglers—idle, lounging young men, who walked up and down the Promenade at certain hours of the day, and flirted, harmlessly enough sometimes, and at other times harmfully, with the young ladies with whom they were on speaking terms. I have listened to such flirtations and wondered in my inmost heart how any girl could have common patience with these silly, languid fops, who lisped and quizzed the passers-by, and complained how they were "bored," and called everything a nuisance, and made unconnected remarks of the most vapid nature, and paid compliments that were equally devoid of wit and gentlemanly breeding. But it was the privilege of my cousins and their compeers to flirt and allow themselves to be trifled with—they, and certain others of their class, enjoyed a monopoly of flirting; while I might not meet the friend of my youth and walk by his side without being accused of unmaidenly behaviour.

I thought the matter over during that silent tea-time, till I worked myself up into a state of intense indignation and defiance; and once, when I caught Holly's half-perplexed and half-reproachful gaze, I darted back a glance of furious disdain. She, too, to doubt me thus! to condemn me all unheard! I only waited for Eliza and Gussie to leave the room, before I should take the initiative, and boldly charge Holly with her uncharitable constructions.

But before the opportunity for which I waited came, the footman entered, and informed me that Mrs. Crofton was

desiring to speak with me in her own dressing-room. I knew by the man's look that he knew quite well the subject on which we were about to speak. Again, as I crossed the passages, I resolved to free myself from this odious bondage —to free myself at all costs, and that very quickly.

I found my aunt enthroned in her chair before the mirror. Chatterwell, her maid, was dressing her hair, and preparing her for dinner. Of course, I expected that Chatterwell would be sent away.

But the woman went on brushing and plaiting her mistress's yellow locks, and I, unasked, seated myself on the other side of the luxurious toilet-table, and waited for the conversation to commence. Her back hair being disposed according to her liking, and ornamented with two huge turquoise-pins, and glittering pendants, Mrs. Crofton at once commenced—"Margaret, of course you know why I wish to speak to you?"

"About the *de-laines*, I suppose, I replied, with as much effrontery as possible.

"You know it is not concerning the *de-laines*, Margaret. I am shocked at your conduct. If it had been one of my own daughters who had made a clandestine assignation, I—"

I did not stay to hear how she would have comported herself under such a dispensation; for I burst forth, "I have made no clandestine assignation, and I will not be questioned in the presence of your maid."

Mrs. Crofton stared at me in angry dismay: her steely blue eyes shot lightning as she turned round, wrenching herself completely out of Chatterwell's hands, and confronting me—I really feared she was going to punish me with blows. "How dare you speak thus to me?"

"I dare speak as I feel, because I am innocent of all that Sibyl has brought against me; and I repeat it, I will not be examined and cross-examined while your servant is in the room. Send her away, and ask me what questions you choose, and I will answer truthfully. But if she remains, I shall go!"

Mrs. Crofton was so overcome by my audacity that she could not answer me. Her toilette was nearly completed, and she hurried Chatterwell, who would fain have lingered over the last touches, saying hastily, "That will do; that will do. How tiresome you are, Chatterwell! Dear me! I can put on my bracelets myself."

In another minute we were alone, and a dead silence seemed to fill the room.

"Now, then," said Mrs. Crofton at last, as if quite prepared for action, "perhaps you will condescend to answer my questions?"

"I will not even trouble you to ask them. The case is simple in the extreme: I met this afternoon with an old friend,—with one whom I had known at St. Eldred's, with whom I have played, when we both were little children, I saw him for the last time in my father's house, three years ago last Christmas; three hours ago, I saw him again in Upping's shop."

I looked her so unflinchingly in the face, and I spoke out so bravely, that I saw she believed me; and if Sibyl had not come in, I feel sure I should have been acquitted on the spot. But Sibyl did come in, and for her benefit I had to repeat the story over again; and as I concluded, an air of incredulous disdain shone forth in every feature. A year ago, I should have quailed before that cold and mocking smile;—now, it only nerved me to fresh effort, for I was determined that Sibyl should triumph over me no more. She coolly assured me that she did not believe a word I said; I as coolly replied, that really was of no consequence to me! I had made a statement, and should not repeat it. Besides, I denied her right to interfere in my concerns: if I behaved improperly, it was her mother's place, not hers, to call me to account. Then Mrs. Crofton interposed with a flood of petty questions; I believe she was frightened at the idea of the furious spirit my daring speeches might evoke. Sibyl's fits of passion had not only spoiled her beauty, but were also damaging her health; and her mother was always anxious to ward off what had come to be called in the house "an attack,"

which really meant a burst of ungoverned and ungovernable rage on the part of her eldest daughter.

I answered all her questions succinctly, but as lucidly as possible: I told her who the Tredgolds were, for I knew Gilbert would never be ashamed of the humble circumstances of his youth; I told her how fond my father was of him; I related the story of the wreck of the "Hirondelle," and of Mr. Saunderson's gratitude; finally, I spoke of Gilbert's adoption—and, foolishly enough, no doubt—of the large fortune he was expected to inherit. There was a strange gleam in Sibyl's azure eyes when I finished the recital—an expression I could not define rested on her still delicate but faded face, and the last roses of her girlhood bloomed once more upon the thin, worn cheek. To my surprise she addressed me affably—for her—"Of course, all this, if it be really true, alters the question, though one cannot understand how it came to pass that your mother, who, after all"—after all *what?* I wondered—"was a Crofton, should permit you to associate with the children of a vulgar fisherman!"

"Stephen Tredgold was not a vulgar man," I replied; "and Gilbert, though at that time scarcely at all educated, was always a gentleman."

But Sibyl went on, as if I had not spoken: "Perhaps your mother had an ulterior object in allowing so singular a companionship; at any rate, it is easily to be understood that she would not wish the intimacy to be discontinued when the young man became Mr. Saunderson's heir!"

"It was precisely at that point it was discontinued," I interrupted hotly, "it was all one to us whether Gilbert Tredgold was a poor lad or a *millionaire* in perspective."

"No doubt," pursued Sibyl, her peculiarly disdainful smile flitting for an instant across her features. "We will give you credit for all disinterestedness, Margaret. Everybody likes to be thought disinterested, you know—at least, most people do. I don't. I mean to do the best I can for myself, and as for others—*vogue la galère!*"

"So that is your *rôle, ma belle cousine?*" was my unuttered thought; but I did not at all understand her.

Presently she resumed, "So, mamma, as Margaret and Mr. Tredgold *have* met, and he has claimed acquaintanceship—which is all right on his part you know—it seems to me that the only proper thing to do is for us to call upon Mr. What's-his-name—the old gentleman, I mean—and invite him and Mr. Tredgold to Crofton Lawn."

I stared with all my might at Sibyl as she said these words, for I perceived she was in earnest. I had not yet learned the art of suppressing all astonishment, and, clever as I thought myself, I had but little notion of the intrigues of society. What might this sudden move of my cousin Sibyl's portend? I could not even guess.

"How old do you say this hero of yours is?" she asked presently.

"He is rather more than a year older than myself,—he must be over nineteen now."

"Oh, indeed! How old was he when he left St. Eldred's?"

"He was in his sixteenth year."

"What has he been doing since?"

"I hardly know. At first he had a private tutor; I think he was preparing for Woolwich, or Greenwich, or some public naval school or college—I really cannot tell."

"And Mr. Saunderson is here to take the waters?"

"Yes: Gilbert said so."

"Oh! How long will they stay?"

"All the winter certainly. They have taken apartments in Imperial-square."

"Well, mamma must call, with papa, of course; it is not quite *en regle*, I suppose, Mr. Saunderson being a bachelor or widower,—at least, there is no Mrs. Saunderson; but they must call, and we must have them here."

A sort of horror seized upon me—the horror I might have experienced had I seen a helpless animal caught in the folds of an anaconda snake. No; I wished to be exonerated from the vague reproach which had been cast upon me through my accidental meeting with Gilbert; but I did *not*

wish him to become a guest at Crofton Lawn. No, a thousand times *no!* Why, I scarcely knew; but some womanly instinct told me that only misery would come of such an intimacy.

"Now you may go, Margaret," said Sibyl presently. "Mamma, you have not finished dressing, and we ought to be in the drawing-room. Go, Margaret. I am sorry I made a little mistake; but you must be aware appearances were quite against you."

I went away at her bidding, confused, almost stunned. What could it all mean? I could only gather that Gilbert and his patron were to be invited to Crofton Lawn on my account. "It would not be for my honour," Sibyl had said, "that the rest of the family should ignore him after I had been seen with him publicly in Upping's shop, and, perhaps, by half Cotswoldbury—for on hot days they affected the Chesnut-walk rather than the Promenade—walking with him on familiar terms." It might be so or not; but what was my honour to Sibyl Crofton? I knew she hated me; I knew she would delight in my discomfiture, in my defeat, and if she could dissociate herself entirely from me, in my disgrace and wretchedness. What then did this sudden move portend? How was I to interpret such unwonted courtesy, such unique consideration? *My* honour, forsooth! Why, she would not have cared had all Cotswoldbury cried shame upon me.

I went back to the school-room with a heavy heart, although my interview with my aunt had terminated in a way so unexpected. Would they slander me to Gilbert?—*what would they do?* And all at once I felt that I would rather stand well with him than with all the world besides. The brief interview of that afternoon had more than reinstated Gilbert in his former place. He was nearest to my heart in those childish days, after my father and my mother;—now my father and mother were dead. I was alone in the world, with none to love me: and I was no more a child, but a woman. Oh, if they maligned me to Gilbert Tredgold, what should I do? how should I bear it?

In the school-room I found Holly, sitting and sewing in

the fading light. She looked up as I entered, inquiringly, and almost searchingly. And I answered her look by saying, "Do not be concerned about me, Holly dear,—you need not be ashamed of your pupil. Even Sibyl declares me innocent: her charges are withdrawn; but—"

"But what, Margaret?"

"I really cannot understand!"

"You cannot understand what? Do be explicit, Margaret, I hate riddles, and I am not the Sphinx."

I told her all that had passed, repeating as well as I could, word for word, every sentence that Sibyl had uttered. It was getting dusk now, and she laid aside her work and sat by the open window, looking meditatively across the grey, solemn hills. "Is it not strange?" I asked, after she had kept silence a little while.

"Very strange," she answered,—"very strange!" She paused, as if in doubt how to continue the conversation. "And this is the Gilbert Tredgold you told me about soon after you came here—the brother of your Bertha Tredgold?"

"The same. Oh, how strange it all is! How strange it has been ever since that night the French ship was wrecked on the Serrars,—the night the poor 'Little Gipsy' foundered, when Gilbert's old fortunes went down with her! Holly, as I looked at that well-dressed, well-bred young man whom I met to-day, I could scarcely believe he was the fisher-boy whom I used to watch mending his nets, and whom I taught such Latin as I knew myself. I wonder if he has the old Eton Grammar still! But, in spite of outward changes, he is just the same old Gilbert as ever—just the same bright way, and the same—the same religious way of looking at things!"

"What do you mean by a religious way of looking at things?"

"I can hardly tell you, Holly. It is not that he talks about religion exactly, but somehow there is religion in all he says. Oh! how we used to talk about life as a voyage! His began roughly enough, but he has been in smooth waters of late years."

"As far as you know, Margaret; but all is not gold that

glitters. The young heir may have his trials as well as the fisher boy of St. Eldred's.

"I wonder if now he ever says, 'So *He* bringeth them unto their desired haven?'"

"Did he say that in old times, Margaret?"

"Often and often. He used to talk so much about this voyage of life which we all must make. I suppose it was living by the sea and being so constantly on the water that made him adopt the image: it seemed far more natural to me then than it does now. And I entered into the idea very fully at the time. I was always wanting to be out among the billows, breasting the storm, cleaving the wild waves, and speeding on my course triumphantly; but Gilbert thought so much about the end of the voyage, about getting into port, —and he would talk with his eyes fixed on some distant point and his cheeks glowing till I could almost fancy he was really looking at the golden hills and the crystal walls of the city he was longing for. That was his desired haven, I know."

"And yours too, Margaret?"

"Yes, yes; I suppose so—that is, after a long and prosperous voyage. But, Holly, I don't care to think about the end *yet*."

"It will not come a day the sooner for your thinking about it."

"I know it, Holly, but just at the very outset of the voyage I must give my attention to the realities of the present. I must live my life, not dream it. I will conjugate the active and the passive verbs, if you please, Holly, and decline the neuter! I am content to love and to be loved, to hate and to be hated; but not to endure that which is neither action nor passion, but being, or a state of being, as Lindley Murray has it."

Holly shook her head. 'Margaret, your passionate nature and your strong self-will will bring you into many a difficulty. In this matter of young Tredgold, be prudent—be wary!"

"*Holly!*" And I flushed up and turned away.

"There it is, my dear—your pride is so easily aflame! And I did not mean to vex you, only to give a word of

counsel. Remember, Margaret, that I am more than twenty years your senior; I know the troubles of early womanhood. Oh, my dear, a girl of eighteen, spirited, impulsive, and orphaned as you are, with no father to protect, no mother to guide, no home to which you really have a claim, is placed in a position where she may be assailed by countless dangers to which girls who are more happily situated are strangers. I know what it is to fight my own way in the world; I know what it is to be wilfully misconstrued, to be causelessly, cruelly suspected: and I feel for you, Margaret, and I fear for you?—for your nature is a more daring one than mine; and you do not make God your guide, your ruler—you do not commit your way to Him. Very soon you will have no friend in this house save Gussie, a child who cannot help you; for I shall soon be gone."

I melted into tears as I listened to that gentle voice; and humbly and heartily I begged my kind friend to forgive all the petulances, all the waywardness of which I had been guilty ever since I first became her pupil. Losing Holly, I should indeed lose a most invaluable friend. There were the Norths, certainly, as true and as dependable as Holly: but then they were not always at hand; neither were they in a position to judge so accurately in every possible case of dilemma, because they could only gather the facts as I reported them; and I felt that it would be out of my power to convey to them the exact impressions they would have received had they been hearers and eye-witnesses of what actually transpired. In difficulties so complicated as mine promised to be, there are always many delicate little points a thorough understanding of which one cannot convey to an absent friend in words. What, on repetition, seem mere trifles, often turn out to be the very hinge on which rests the most important changes. The Norths would do their best, and they were wise as well as good people; but still they would not be with me, knowing all the antecedents and all the sequences of every case as Holly did.

Two days afterwards my uncle and Mrs. Crofton called on Mr. Saunderson. Two days more, and I was told that he

and Gilbert were coming to dine, and that I was to form one of the party; and in the evening Sibyl came to me and said, "You have no proper dinner-dress, Margaret—you can't come down in a high frock and long sleeves. I am going to buy myself a new dress for next Thursday, and you shall have one exactly like it!"

If she had told me she would buy a rope wherewith to hang me, I think I should have been rather less surprised; and the more I reflected on this sudden change of tactics, the more uneasy I became. What did it all mean, and how would it end? Not well for me, I was well assured, if Sibyl carried out her plans, whatever they might be.

CHAPTER XXVI.

MY FIRST DINNER-PARTY.

SIBYL was as good as her word: she went out shopping next morning, and, when she returned, she came straight to the school-room, where I was sitting still perplexing myself about the very unexpected course things seemed taking,—and graciously enough informed me that the purchase of my new dress was *un fait accompli.* I thanked her, and very naturally asked her what sort of dress it was. "A lama," was her reply; "the very finest texture, and the most delicate shade I ever saw. There were two embroidered muslins the young man wanted me to take; but I decided for the lamas the moment I beheld them. They are in the dressmaker's hands already,—I went round to Madame's at once; and one of her people will come up to-night to try them on." I felt so bewildered that I thought I must be dreaming. *Sibyl* taking all this trouble for me!—it was inexplicable,—a mystery of mysteries! Then I inquired what colour my new robe might be.

"*Blue,*" she answered complacently,—"the loveliest blue. A perfect azure with a sort of bloom upon it. I have plenty of lace for trimming both the dresses."

Now, blue suited Sibyl exactly: it harmonized with her

fair complexion, and golden locks, and her violet-coloured eyes;—such a dress would set her off to the best advantage; for white now made her look old and haggard, and pink and neutral tints for her were out of the question. Decidedly blue was Sibyl's colour: but not *mine:* it made me look hideous. I, with my dark skin and hair, wanted white or black only, relieved with pink or amber; and yet, what could I say? Was she doing this of malice prepense, or was she merely thoughtless, selfishly absorbed in her own appearance, and altogether careless about mine? However, I did not like to seem ungrateful, so I thanked Sibyl again; but I suppose there was something hesitating in my tone, for she inquired, "Are you not contented?"

I replied, "I am thinking whether pale blue will not make my swarthy skin look darker even than it is."

"Nonsense. Your skin is not swarthy. Gussie is swarthy if you like; but your complexion is a clear olive. Anything suits dark women; it is we fair girls who are obliged to be particular, if we would not frighten people. And I will lend you my turquoise brooch and bracelet. I shall wear my pearl set.

I said no more, and resigned myself to my fate; but the next morning Madame herself made her appearance, and we had to undergo the operation of "trying on." Madame was a clever little Frenchwoman, with wonderfully keen perceptions, with a perfect taste as *modiste*, and endowed with a sort of tact that was near akin to cunning. She fitted on Sibyl's bodice; and certainly it was exquisite, both in shape and in hue: and Sibyl herself, with the flush of gratified vanity on her cheek, and the light of excitement in her eye, looked once more very charming.

But when it came to my turn, Madame no longer flattered, but began to criticise. "*Mais, mademoiselle*, this dress of blue is not conformable for you. You have very *beaux yeux*, but they are dark like the night, and your tint is *brun*,—vairy *brun*. It is a tint I much approve, but not with a *bleu si délicate* for the robe; it will make you look not at all preety, mademoiselle. Bah! it will spoil you! You could

wear now the *couleurs* vairy rich,—*par exemple*, rose, or *coquelicot*, or *abricot*, or black lace with those full *couleurs*, *chère Mademoiselle Marguerite*, or white muslin worked with gold, or—"

"That will do," cried Sibyl, haughtily. "Madame, my cousin and I have not time this morning to listen to one of your elaborate lectures on dress. Try on Miss Torrington's bodice, and you can write down your little remarks when you go home, and send them to *Le Follet*. Let it be enough that on this occasion I wish my cousin and myself to be dressed alike."

Madame darted a curious look at Sibyl and another at me, but she made a profound curtsey, and held her peace. Her little black eyes twinkled with something very like amusement; but she could not refrain herself when, having "fitted me on," she surveyed her handiwork, and beheld what she called "such a very hideous combination."

"I will have no pleasure at all in this dress," she burst out. "It can never be to me a work of art; for in the very commencement it is in vairy beastly taste!"

Whereat we both laughed. Madame always translated her own *bêtise* into "*beastly:*" her medley of good French and most indifferent English was often very entertaining.

In process of time, however, our dresses came home, both elegantly trimmed, and fitting perfectly: but when on the Thursday evening I came to put mine on, I wished with all my heart I could find some adequate excuse for not wearing it. It made me look ill and sallow, and the turquoise ornaments only increased the bad effect. In addition to the brooch and bracelet, Sibyl had produced a wreath of turquoise forget-me-nots, which I was to wear in my hair; but I cast them aside after a single glance, and decided that I would not disfigure myself any more than I could help. Gussie came in as I was finishing my toilet, and she exclaimed, "You don't look nice at all, Margaret! What is the matter with you? Your dress is just like Sib's, and she is looking lovely—like a fairy-queen! I have just been to her room."

"What suits Sibyl does not suit me, Gussie."

"To be sure not; I see now. And, Margaret,—I shouldn't wonder if she knew it all the time, and meant to spite you. I think she wished to make you look badly. Don't wear the thing."

"I must, Gussie; she has taken so much trouble about it. It is the first kindness she has ever shown me, and if I reject it, what will be the consequences?"

"Never mind the consequences; she cannot drown you, as she drowned the cat! And she does not mean it for a kindness; I am sure she does not. I am only a little girl, but I know things. Margaret, dear, *don't* wear it: put on your white spotted muslin, and wear your rose-coloured ribbons, and I will get you some real flowers for your hair."

"But my white muslin is high, and it has long sleeves."

"So much the better. I hate Sib's bare arms and skinny neck: your arms are round enough, and your neck-bones do not all show, like hers. But you will look a great deal nicer with sleeves down to your wrists, and a little lace quilling round your throat. Margaret, you *shall not* go down in that blue thing!"

I am not sure now, whether Gussie in her vehemence, trampled accidentally on the skirt of my troublesome new robe, or whether she resorted to one of her old mischievous expedients: but she set her foot firmly on the bottom of the dress, and, as I drew back at that moment, very quickly a terrific rent was the result.

"There," she cried, triumphantly; "you cannot wear it now, and there is no time to mend it." Indeed, there was not, for the delicate fabric was so frayed that it would require many careful stitches for its reparation. I cannot say I was sorry, but I felt sure that Sibyl's displeasure would fall on me rather than on the real offender.

"Take it off!" cried Gussie, exultingly, unfastening hooks and loops with marvellous rapidity; "I'll reach out the spotted muslin. There! put it on as quickly as you can, and I will go and see about the flowers." She came back with a single, soft white moss rose, nestling

in its leaves; this she placed in the bosom of my frock, securing it with a little gold brooch of her own,—her most cherished possession, the gift of her sister Leonora. Then she fastened among my curls a spray of snowy stephanotis, and clapped her hands, as she danced round me in her wild delight, declaring that Sibyl would go crazy when she saw me!

I dare say it was silly, but I was only eighteen, and it was my first appearance, and I certainly took pleasure in contemplating the effects of Gussie's skill. Gilbert would see me looking my very best! As for what Sibyl might say or do, that must all come afterwards; she would scarcely fall into one of her furies in the presence of the strangers and the guests who were to meet them. But my heart beat violently as I went downstairs; and, pausing outside the drawing-room door, I heard many voices speaking, so that a goodly number of our visitors must have arrived. I had hoped this might be so; but at the moment I wished there had been but my aunt, and uncle, and Sibyl in the room. In another minute I was in their midst, everything swimming round me, so that I could scarcely discern one person from another. Before I recovered my equanimity, Gilbert was at my side, and begging me to come and be introduced to Mr. Saunderson.

Involuntarily I took the proffered arm—what else could I do?—and he led me across the room to where Mr. Saunderson was sitting. He had grown enormously stout since I had seen him last at St. Eldred's, his nose was redder, his voice was gruffer,—indeed, his whole countenance and manner were of so fiery an aspect that I wondered whether he had been living on curries, and cayenne, and full-proof brandy ever since we parted. He did not remember me at all; I had not expected that he would, for I had come but little in his way, and between the ages of fourteen and eighteen one changes greatly. "So this is the young lady?" he said stiffly,—"this is the young lady who taught you Latin, and was with you when the 'Little Gipsy' foundered?"

"Yes, sir; this is Miss Torrington, of whom we have so often spoken."

The large grey eyes that were gazing fixedly upon me were anything but pleasant to encounter. They were not earnest, deep-seeing eyes, such as seem involuntarily to read your very soul at a single glance, but they were fierce, keen, suspicious organs, making one, in spite of self-control, half-angry, half-frightened. I began to think Gilbert might not have such a very easy berth of it, after all; the iron hand, the claret-coloured nose, and the growling voice, all impressed me disagreeably; and then the scowl upon his face!—I had never seen anything more horribly ferocious. And he looked at me with an air that seemed to say, "I don't think much of you, young lady."

All this while I had never glanced at Sibyl or at Mrs. Crofton, who were at some little distance; but now, as Gilbert drew a chair for me, and established himself near it, they both came up to where I sat. "What is the meaning of this?" said my aunt, touching my skirt, and trying to speak calmly, even to look amiably. Sibyl's colour was coming and going rapidly, and that I knew to be with her a sign of terrible, but suppressed passion.

"Gussie stepped upon my dress. It was an accident," I said, in a low voice. "I was obliged to wear this one."

"Was it seriously damaged?"

"So much as to prevent my coming down in it: it would have taken half an hour to repair the rent."

"Indeed! Well, I am very sorry; for poor Sibyl is sadly disappointed. She had set her mind on your being dressed exactly like herself to-night, and I think you might have made an effort *for once*, Margaret." There was so much stress on that "*for once*," that I felt my face getting very hot. "Then," Mrs. Crofton continued, "you might at least have worn the ornaments she selected for you—"

Sibyl interfered—her face was quite composed, a winning smile was on her chiselled lips, and her voice was sweet and steady; for once she had mastered her temper so far as to restrain perfectly its outward manifestation—"Don't say

another word, mamma; it does not matter. I dare say Margaret thought she looked better in white muslin and flowers; and though I had, as you say, set my heart upon our appearing like sisters to-night, I do not mind it much."

"But I mind," said Mrs. Crofton, gravely. "You are very amiable, my dear; but it was not kind in Margaret. I wish she would learn to think a little more of other people's feelings—it does not do in this world only to consider one's self; does it, Mr. Saunderson?"

"No, madam," was the gruff reply; "but what is the matter, if I may venture to inquire?"

"Nothing of any moment; only I like to see young people unselfish, Mr. Saunderson. Really, half the girls in the present day seem to think only of their dress, and their good looks, and their silly preferences. It was not so when I was young; *we* knew what obedience and self-sacrifice meant. And I have endeavoured to train my daughters as I was trained myself; but Margaret did not come under my care till her habits were fixed, and her character nearly formed."

Oh! how my poor cheeks burned! how the angry blood coursed through my veins! how my heart throbbed with mingled shame and indignation! for there sat Mr. Saunderson hearing all with his cynical half-smile, and there sat Gilbert listening gravely to every word.

Mr. Saunderson again asked what was the matter. Mrs. Crofton began to speak—

"Do not, mamma," implored Sibyl; "I assure you I am not vexed: let us say no more about it."

But "mamma" would not be silenced. "No, no, my dear," she resumed. "I shall speak. The facts are very simple in themselves. Sibyl was very anxious that Margaret should appear to advantage this evening. She has no sister old enough to leave the school-room, so she naturally enough interests herself about her cousin, who has not what *we* consider a nice taste in dress. So my Sibyl resolved on making Margaret a present, and she went herself to Cavendish's, and chose two dresses precisely alike: there is one of them, Mr. Saunderson."

"Yes, ma'am; and a very pretty dress too!"

"Then she gave orders to the dressmaker to cut and trim them exactly alike, and I must say they were a complete success; more than this, she chose a set of ornaments for her cousin that accorded with her dress, and she, and I too, thought how pleased and happy Margaret would be. But Margaret does not agree with us, and puts away our little gifts—for really I was as much concerned in it as my daughter—and we are naturally vexed."

"No, indeed, mamma," persisted Sibyl; "speak for yourself. Margaret looks so well, I cannot blame her. If she had given me a hint I might have copied her; only I knew that you were intent on the blue dresses, and therefore I should have worn mine had I torn it dreadfully."

"Very amiable of you, Miss Crofton," said Mr. Saunderson. And I thought his approval was about as agreeable as his censure. "It is a pity Miss Torrington does not take a lesson out of your book; but, as you remarked, Mrs. Crofton, it is a rare thing in these days to find young people bent upon anything but satisfying their own wishes. And I really think there are more foolish young men and women in this Cotswoldbury than in any other town in England."

At this juncture dinner was announced. Mrs. Crofton took Mr. Saunderson's arm, and, saying to Gilbert, "Mr. Tredgold, will you escort my daughter?" prepared to leave the room. I went out with a young man whom I greatly disliked, and I presently found myself seated as far from Gilbert as the limits of the table permitted. The dinner was long and wearisome;—and more than once I wished myself at Maple Cottage, drinking tea peacefully and happily in Mrs. North's little parlour. Only I *could* see Gilbert Tredgold, where I sat, and in the pauses of the conversation round me, I could hear his voice. I scarcely knew it then; but both made amends for all the mortifications I was enduring, and for all the humiliations that might be still in store for me. In the few days that had elapsed since the encounter in Upping's shop, Gilbert had strangely filled my thoughts; not so much the Gilbert of old time—

my early friend, the fisher-boy whom my father loved—as Mr. Tredgold, the cross Mr. Saunderson's *protégé*. And I heard Sibyl chatting gaily, and I saw her blue eyes sparkling with vivacity: she was evidently bent on fascination. I could not help it, but I thought of Nathan's parable of the rich man and the ewe lamb. Now I began to understand what had hitherto been so very inexplicable; now it dawned upon me that Sibyl, after her many disappointments, would console herself with a marriage of expediency. A boy of nineteen is easily caught in the toils of a woman half-a-dozen years older than himself; and this boy was heir to a great fortune? I went back to the drawing-room miserably depressed, yet scarcely knowing what it was that grieved me; and I was meditating escaping to my own room, and to Gussie, who would be thinking of going to bed, when the door opened, and the gentlemen came in, and once more I was in Gilbert's presence. Sibyl came up to me a few minutes afterwards, and said, kindly, "Don't look so moody, Margaret. Never mind about the dress; I do not. And I will talk mamma over presently."

"Do you really mean it, Sibyl?"

"Of course I do. We may be sisters without wearing uniform."

I made no answer, but I felt more and more puzzled. Presently I found Gilbert taking a vacant chair beside me, and my heart beat high with hope and pleasure, and I turned to see the old bright look I knew so well of old, beaming on me, and to hear the tones that always spoke of quiet content and cheerful aspiration. We talked for some time about North Combe, and I found that he had been there twice since I had left it—the last time, only in the early bloom of the same summer that was now mellowing into autumn.

"I wonder Mirrie did not tell you?" he said at length.

I felt a strange thrill pass through me as he spoke that name; but I answered, carelessly, as I thought, "The truth is, Gilbert, Miriam Downing and I have ceased to correspond."

"Indeed! She did not tell me so. How was it?"

"It just happened so: she was busy, and I was busy; I was engrossed here, she had duties there which abundantly occupied her. We kept up a form of correspondence for eighteen months after we parted; but we wrote every time at longer and longer intervals. It was my fault in the first place—mine indeed throughout, I must say; and I was the one at last to keep silence altogether: Mirrie's last letter still remains unanswered. I may write to her again some day, but I think not."

"Why not?"

"I can hardly explain. We never were great friends; she is such a child, you know; and then I fancied my letters were liable to the inspection of the Miss Everetts. It was just one of those things that 'came about,' as we say."

"I understand, but I am sorry; you have lost something, and she loses too, of course. But, Margaret, she is the loveliest creature imaginable; not much of a child now, though I believe she is not much over fifteen. She is like a spring blossom, like a clear, sparkling streamlet, like a tremulous star, shining out of the bosom of the glowing west on a fair summer evening."

"Is she more beautiful than my cousin Sibyl?" something prompted me to say.

"She is so different, though both are blonde and golden-haired; and it is hardly fair to Mirrie to compare her with Miss Crofton, who has mixed with society, and acquired all those nameless graces which—which—you understand, Margaret—that perfect finish and exquisite delicacy which make a lovely woman *most lovely*. Mirrie Downing is a sweet little wild flower; your cousin is a rare exotic: the one is an innocent, fairy-like country girl; the other a finished, high-bred beauty."

"You know that Clara Berners is married?" I asked, for I wished to change the conversation.

"Yes," he replied; "she has married the new rector at Cleeve-super-Mare. Did you know I had met your cousin, Mrs. Druce, in London?"

"My cousin Leonora?" I asked, eagerly.

"Yes, I think that is her name; her sisters-in-law, who were with her, called her 'Nora;' she is very like Miss Crofton."

"Very much—only handsomer; at least, she was when I saw her last."

"I prefer Miss Crofton to Mrs. Druce. Mrs. Druce is far more brilliant, I allow—fresher, gayer; but what Miss Crofton has lost—and I should say it is lost—in mere colouring and contour, is more than atoned for in sweetness of expression and depth of mind. Your cousin Sibyl is a rare creature, Margaret. And how fond she seems of you!" I was struck dumb. Of what witcheries must Sibyl not be capable!

Then I was asked to play and sing; and my cousin Tom, who had just arrived from town on his way to Scotland, came in while I was at the pianoforte, and, after the usual compliments to the guests, took his place at my side. He stayed there all the evening, talking his usual nonsense, and confiding to me "what a dreadful bother he was in for want of *tin*." And Sibyl and Gilbert were deep in conversation all the time; and how meek and gentle, almost sad, she looked, and with what deep interest she seemed to listen to his words!

"I say, Madge," said Tom, just as the party was breaking up, "Sib means mischief. She's going to catch a gold-fish this time if she can. Tredgold's in for it, mark my words. Well, I wish him joy; but I suppose his condition may be represented by the last syllable of his name!"

Oh, Gilbert! Gilbert! was it really so? And again I thought of the parable of the ewe lamb.

CHAPTER XXVII.

DIFFICULT CIRCUMSTANCES.

THE next day and the next Gilbert came to Crofton Lawn; and, after awhile, the day on which he did not come was marked as an exception from the general rule. Most

frequently Mr. Saunderson accompanied him, though sometimes he came alone.

At that period, my life seemed to me one long, misty, incomprehensible dream. Suddenly my position in the house was changed. I was emancipated from the schoolroom and I was made free of the drawing-room; my aunt and cousin appeared really desirous of bringing me forward, and giving me what are called the advantages of a good "introduction;" they spoke applaudingly of my musical gifts, and were always soliciting me to display them for the benefit of visitors. Also I had a wardrobe, suitable to the new position I was made to hold, and the unfortunate blue lama was actually cut up for Eliza, who insisted on taking a vast relay of new dresses to her Brighton school. The grinning footman became obsequious, and even Chatterwell treated me with the deference due to her master's niece.

But the change was too sudden to be agreeable, and I could not, puzzle as I would, divine the motives which actuated Mrs. Crofton or her daughter,—for that they had motives, and very strong ones, I was well assured. I knew perfectly well that they loved me no better than before. Gilbert's unlooked for appearance had been the signal which had caused this sudden veering of the helm; and I could easily perceive that Sibyl would, if possible, win his affections, and become engaged to him. But *why* I was made to play the particular part assigned to me, in the drama that was always being performed, was more than I could guess; and the airy but still palpable mystery that hung about my path worried me exceedingly. Did you ever walk abroad on a sunny autumn day, and find cobwebs apparently floating in thin air, and so finely spun as to be nearly invisible, obscuring your vision at every turn; not veiling from you aught that lay around, but yet perplexing you with their intangible gossamer at every step? If so, you know something of my experiences at the time I write of. Only it was mental, not bodily, vision, that was so constantly bewildered.

The time came, all too soon, for Holly to take her

departure, and thus I was to lose the only earthly friend to whom I could go for wise, impartial counsel. I had not cared to discuss with her the troubles that just then encompassed me. I had a secret that I tried to hide even from myself; and I dreaded Holly's quick perceptions. Still, I was quite sure that she knew very much of the state of my mind and feelings, and something, perhaps, of the mind and feelings of those whom I failed to comprehend.

It was the last night of Holly's stay among us. The next morning she would take the train to Blackingham, on her way to Cumberland, whither she was going to spend several months with her old pupil, Miss Bertha Tredgold, of Graysthwaite Tower. I had been helping her to pack all the afternoon; for the most part very silently, for my heart was sore at the thought of the morrow's parting, and I was inly grieving at the remembrance of all the hasty speeches and ungrateful glances I had bestowed upon my kind and faithful friend during the three years we had spent together. And Holly, too, seemed intent on business; always methodical and rather precise, she was not likely, on the eve of such a journey, to relax the principles which had grown to be with her a sort of second nature, and it was not till the last trunk was covered and strapped, and the last direction card attached, that she showed any disposition to converse.

Then, drawing her chair up to the fire—for the evenings had grown suddenly chilly—she said, "Margaret, let us have one more talk. Come and sit beside me once again!"

I came—glad that without absolutely turning round she could not see my face, for I felt that I could not trust my tell-tale cheeks; and besides, the tears were rising ever and anon and threatening to overflow. My eyelids ached with the effort I made to repress them.

"Margaret," began Holly, in a low, quiet voice, that betokened, I knew, an intense earnestness, "you count me your friend?"

"The best friend I have on earth, Holly! I know it now as I have never known it before—now that I am going to lose you."

"Then I may say out to you very plainly all that is in my heart?"

"Say what you will, Holly,—I know it will be all kind and wise. Oh, Holly, my real friend, I think a stab from you might be kinder than the honeyed words and attentions of—some other people."

"If I stab you, Margaret, it will certainly be in love. And words that are not angry words may be sharp as swords, and mine—"

"Only say them, Holly. This time to-morrow I shall not be able to listen to them."

"Are you happier, Margaret, than you were before this sudden alteration came about?"

"*Yes*, and *no*, Holly!"

"Don't be enigmatical, my dear, if you can help it. You know I am dense at catching double meanings, and I love plain speaking."

"And I wish to speak plainly. I am happier, because—because—well, because I find that I really like society. I enjoy my evenings now—I can even enjoy the Promenade a little; and I have my liberty more, and every girl likes that. And I am *not* happier, because I cannot see the real source of the unlooked for changes that have come upon me. I cannot look upon the improvement in my circumstances as real,—I cannot believe in its continuance; I feel as if I were being made *a means to an end!* And yet I have nothing substantial upon which to base so singular and romantic an idea!"

"Margaret! I think you were safer under the old *régime*. I mean safer from that which may bring you into trouble,—not safer from real danger; for God is a strength and a shield on the battle-field, as in the quiet fortress. I wish I could leave you trusting *Him* entirely and profoundly!"

"I do trust in God, Holly."

"As a mere article of the Christian faith you trust in Him. Your trust, Margaret, is the trust of education and simple habit, just as you naturally trust the constitution of your country. It is a general, not a particular trust. You do

not know what it is to cast yourself, so to speak, on God,—to commit yourself and your way to Him entirely,—to believe firmly, even in the blackest midnight of the soul, that the sunshine of His love is still the same,—that all is well, and will be well, whatever may betide?"

"No! Holly, I do not know what such trust is;—I should not think many people do."

"Not so many as one would expect, seeing all the comfort and the strength that come from such a childlike confidence! But yet there are thousands in the world, and there have been tens of thousands, ay, an unnumbered multitude,—to whom God is for ever a strong and abiding refuge—a very present help in time of trouble."

"Holly, you must have had great sorrows in your life."

"I had. I have still one great sorrow; it is softened and subdued now, and I know that it has been a blessing to me. I can rejoice in many things, and thank God for all He gives, and, I hope, for what He takes away as well; but the shadow is always there,—it always will be there to the end. When I was a year or two older than you are, Margaret, I was engaged to be married."

"I always thought there was something of that sort, Holly."

"We were engaged—William and I; but we knew we must wait an indefinite period, for we both were very poor. And we were willing to wait, for we were young, and life seemed all before us. It was what might be called in worldly parlance an imprudent engagement; but we loved each other very dearly, and we had no one to consult. Besides, he was so good, so noble, so steadfast. Years rolled on, and still hope deferred failed to make our hearts sick,—we trusted each other and were content, and waited for the brighter day we doubted not would dawn some time or other. He worked and I worked. We saw each other but seldom, though we corresponded regularly;—not as lovers correspond now-a-days,—not as your cousin Leonora and Captain Druce used to write to each other; for the penny post was not,—letters cost money then, and our purses were always scantily supplied."

"Poor Holly! It must have been very hard."

"It was the joy of Eden, compared with what came afterwards. I cannot tell you all the tale, Margaret; it is too long, and it is a task beyond my strength. I had a temper once, something like yours, my dear; only—forgive me—scarcely so impetuous. But I was naturally jealous; and what is more cruel and unreasoning than jealousy? Well, a cloud came between us; I doubted my friend. Appearances were against him, certainly; but where one has trusted long and safely, appearances ought to go for nothing. I had not patience. I accused him of unfaithfulness, and I did not,—I would not,—receive his simple denial. I wanted an entire explanation, which, for another's honour, he could not just then give. He assured me that I had no cause for my displeasure; that, if I would only wait, I should know precisely all the merits of the case. I wrote again, and said I could not wait, and that till he explained everything I must be displeased."

"And yet you really loved him, Holly?"

"I loved him as my own soul; but pride and temper bade me torture him with doubts. After a little while, he wrote coolly, though still kindly. I resented the change, and took refuge in silence. Three of his letters remained unanswered: then there came a long blank. I was too proud to break the terrible silence that had grown to be to me an intolerable pain; but I would have given worlds had he sent me the merest line—the slightest token to let me know he thought about me still. I could even have begged him to forgive me, had he only opened the way by writing just a few short lines. I wanted but the opportunity, I told myself, to fly back to my old allegiance,—from which, indeed, in my heart of hearts, I had never wavered. But weeks passed on, and no word reached me, and the suspense was becoming intolerable. Every morning I told myself I could not bear the strain another day; every evening I said, 'To-morrow I shall hear.' At last I did hear. A letter came to me, directed in a strange hand; written, too, by a clergyman of whom I had sometimes heard. It was very

kindly written, and as gently as possible were the terrible tidings conveyed. I had read two pages before I realised the awful truth. Margaret, my dear friend was *dead!* He had been dead for some weeks; only there was no one about him who knew any of his friends, and it was not till the rector of the parish, despairing of information from any other source, examined his papers, that my address and my relations towards him were ascertained."

"But he did not die through—?"

"Not through my unkindness,—thank God, no;—he was a man of another stamp from that: but I made him suffer,—I, who loved him more than words could tell, had embittered the last days of his life. He had, in course of business, visited a town where a highly-infectious fever was raging, and he returned home to his lodgings only to sicken, to become speedily delirious, and to die. From frenzy he sank into unconsciousness; there was no time to send any message to me, though I believe he spoke my name with his last breath. Oh, Margaret! never let pride and temper shadow all your life as they have shadowed mine. I did really trust him: I knew in my heart that he was faithful,—'tender and true,' like Douglas in the old song. But my unhappy jealous temper having been aroused, no mere assurances would suffice, and then, though I knew I was in the wrong, I was too proud to own myself mistaken. And when I would have sought reconciliation he was in the grave."

"It was dreadful, Holly! Was it very long ago?"

"Nearly eighteen years. We will not talk any more about myself, if you please, Margaret; but I thought, ere we parted, I would tell you this sad story of mine. If ever you are tempted to undue resentment,—tempted by pride and passion,—remember what I have told you this night, and take warning."

"You think I am proud and passionate?"

"I know that you are, and I know that these dangerous attributes of yours are likely to be called into action. I know, too, that if you cherished resentment it would be of no ordinary kind, neither would it be easily dispelled. Oh,

Margaret, my dear girl! I do not want to frighten you; but yours is just the nature to make sudden and frightful shipwreck by striking on the rocks of impulse and impetuous pride. Tell me, now, how you feel towards your cousin Sybil;—tell me candidly."

"Candidly, then, Holly, I very nearly hate her."

"Yet she is kinder to you than she has ever been before,—more considerate than I ever knew her with her own sisters!"

"I distrust her kindness, I shrink from her seeming considerations. I scarcely know what she purposes, but I am well assured she has some great end in view."

"And so am I. She intends to marry your friend, Gilbert Tredgold."

"I fancy so myself; but look at their respective ages!"

"There is nothing unprecedented in that. Miss Crofton is not so old as she looks; and superiority of years on either side is a mere question of taste."

"She seems to me many years older than Mr. Tredgold."

"She seems so, indeed, by a whole decade; but you must remember it is not so. Sibyl Crofton is only in her twenty-third year—comparatively a girl; only, her younger sisters have married so early, and given us a sort of impression that she is fast growing into an old maid."

"But Gilbert is not twenty—not much more than nineteen: I know when his birthday occurred, and he was born in the year before I was."

"Still, there is little of the boy in him; he is as old in mind, and I think in manner, as some of Sibyl's former suitors, who were half-a-dozen years his senior. And, though I certainly think it is better for the husband to be the older of the two, it is really of little consequence where the disparity is of no great account. If a man truly cares for a woman, who in everything else is suitable, it is a very hard case if he must not marry her because she came into the world several or a half-a-dozen years before him."

"I cannot quite agree with you, Holly: still, if Sibyl and Mr. Tredgold like each other, I—I hope they will be happy."

"That I do not think can ever come to pass. But as Mr. Saunderson, in his bearish way, seems to have taken to Sibyl I think it very likely that she will gain her end."

"So do I. But, Holly, what is all this to us? The question still remains unanswered,—how am *I* to serve her in her projects? That she has a certain work for me to do, I cannot doubt,—hence the startling change in her conduct towards me; but I cannot yet divine what it may be."

"I see but dimly. I do not feel that I ought to tell you what I think I see, lest I should be mistaken."

"You are very prudent, Holly."

"And I want to speak to you about your cousin Tom, Margaret."

"About Tom, Holly? What can you have to say about him?"

"Do you know that your name and his are spoken together?"

"Holly! are you sure of this?"

"Quite sure. I do not like mysteries, Margaret, and therefore I will tell you why I say so much. A day or two since your aunt came to speak to me here in this room, and nurse was with me, helping me to go through my wardrobe preparatory to packing. Mrs. Crofton lingered some time, talking of various things: at last, looking from the window, she exclaimed, 'Oh! there are Tom and Margaret gathering flowers;—they have been taking a walk, I suppose.' There was a peculiar expression in nurse's eyes as she folded up my black satinette, and presently she said, 'Mr. Tom seems to like his cousin's society, ma'am?' You know nurse is a privileged person, and says all sorts of audacious things, that no one else dares to utter; but I thought at that moment she had gone rather too far. Conceive my astonishment when your aunt,—who has so often striven to impress upon me, and upon yourself also, the remembrance of your being *not* a Crofton,—replied, 'Well, nurse, I cannot of course shut my eyes to the fact. It is not what we should have chosen for him,—we did hope at one time he was thinking of Miss Agatha Druce; but it is quite in vain to endeavour

to force the affections of young people; and if we interfered between him and Margaret evil might come of it. She is a good girl, thoroughly well-conducted, and she has good blood in her veins, and for a dark woman she is not bad looking; and my poor Tom, if he were baulked, might grow unsteady again. Marriage will settle him if anything will; and really he has given his father and myself much uneasiness.'"

"I know *that*," I returned, shortly; and then I sat silent, feeling quite confounded. Had a thunderbolt fallen at my feet I could scarcely have been more startled, more dismayed. Holly had given me the key now to several little mysteries that I had failed to comprehend. But marry Tom! my cousin Tom, who was over head and ears in debt, who had literally no bones in his character, who was fickle as the winds in his resolves, whose private life would not bear inspection. Why, I knew that Captain Druce had almost forbidden him his house. Marry Tom! for whom I had not the least particle of respect; towards whom I entertained the very mildest of cousinly regards,—when, as was sometimes the case, I did not absolutely dislike him. No, indeed; sooner would I turn housemaid and scrub the floors for my living. Even if there were no such person as Gilbert Tredgold in the world, no threats and no entreaties could ever make me plight my troth to such a man as Tom.

After a while I told Holly this, and she seemed relieved. Presently she said, "I am afraid you may be placed in very difficult circumstances, my dear. I think you could not do better than make a friend of Mrs. North,—she is sensible, as well as kind and true; and I fancy the Norths know a great deal concerning your cousin Tom. Margaret, I know that of him which I could not tell to you! He is a young man who is always sinning from mere laxity of principle. He is not, I think, what one might call innately vicious; but he is idle, and weak, and self-indulgent. I feel sure he never struggles with a temptation. And then, he is lamentably deficient in conscientiousness and firmness. If I were a mother, and he the heir to a peerage and a princely fortune,

I would not entrust him with a daughter's happiness. I am not quite sure, Margaret, whether I ought to say it,—strong expressions, as a rule, are better avoided,—but I cannot help it, now that we are on the eve of parting,—I must tell you that I had rather hear that you were gone to join your parents in a better world than I would hear of your marriage to your cousin."

"Holly, it is absurd! Are you sure you did not dream all this? I can assure you my aunt never gave me reason to believe she entertained so preposterous a notion. Sibyl speaks of her brother with undisguised contempt and aversion,—*she* has never sought to recommend him to my favour. It was she who told me he had been rusticated. And as for Tom himself, he never said one word to me that he might not have said to Sibyl, or, at least, to Nora, who is, you know, his favourite sister,—indeed, I think he has taken me in her place, now that she is gone away. He tells me more about his scrapes than I care to hear, and I hate his incessant slang."

"It does not always need *words* to convey a meaning,—such a meaning as Tom's is supposed to be."

"Depend upon it, Tom would resort to words from sheer inability to express himself in any other way. He has no idea of any of the finer modes of demonstrating feeling. He is too coarse-natured, too much wanting in refinement of feeling, to reveal an affection otherwise than in the most unmistakeable English. Depend upon it, it is all a mistake; but I will be careful."

Early the next morning dear, good Holly left Cotswoldbury, and it was many a year before I saw her face again. After she was gone, feeling particularly restless and dissatisfied, I set off to Maple Cottage, where I had not been for some weeks. I resolved that I would make a friend of gentle Mary North.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

OTHER PEOPLE'S TROUBLES.

How calm and peaceful seemed the atmosphere of Maple Cottage after the excitements and perturbations of Crofton Lawn! It was a lovely autumn day, and the crimson and russet foliage was calmly fluttering down about me as I took my way along the lane in which stood the "Palace of Content."

When I reached the garden-gate, I paused a minute to look around me. The maples, whence the cottage took its name, were of various hues, from paly gold to tawny crimson; a great horse-chesnut was almost as magnificent in the gorgeous colouring of its thin foliage as it had been in its floral beauty in the early summer-time. The sumach-trees began to wear their bright ensanguined livery, and the Virginia creeper that mantled all one side of the house, and part of the lowly roof, was flaming in the noonday sun like a royal banner, and the feathery tufts of the seeded clematis hung gracefully about the trellised porch.

And all around the quiet woods were stretching, clad in those splendid robes that glorify decay, and the hills seemed sleeping under the blue arch of that unclouded sky. Touchingly beautiful seemed the outer world that day,—richer and riper than in its vernal loveliness, or in the green luxuriance of the happy summer-tide; and the tears stole into my eyes as I looked forth on the fair, soft, smiling landscape, so soon to be shrouded in the mists and neutral greys of winter. That glow of beauty, resting hectic-like upon the fading face of nature, was so like the last strange gleams of an unearthly bloom lighting up the solemn brows from whence this world's impress is departing.

But it was only for a moment that I indulged in the tears that

> "Rise in the heart, and gather to the eyes,
> In looking on the happy autumn fields,
> And thinking of the days that are no more;"

the next minute I had gone through the wicket-gate, and was passing between the small beds, all ablaze with late verbenas and scarlet pelargoniums, crimson salvies and dazzling blue lobelias. The side-borders were gay with dahlias and hollyhocks, and splendid China asters; they were like a bright mosaic, set in the gorgeous framework of the maple foliage, and the glossy holly-hedge that shut them in from the lane and the pasture lands beyond. The sere leaves of the oak and beech were lightly scattered over the tiny lawns, where yet the dews were lying impearled on every shining blade of grass; and one berry-laden mountain-ash waved its coral clusters in the soft, sweet, southern breeze; but the redbreast, not the lark, was singing!

All was very still to-day, as I made my way up to the door, which, as usual, stood open within the porch; but I could hear the murmur of the rocking-chair,—for Mrs. North had had another baby that summer—a little sister for Hetty, who at once constituted herself head-nurse; and I could hear, also, Hetty herself practising diligently on the old pianoforte, which had been her mother's in her girlhood's days. My heart smote me when I remembered how long it was since I had given the child a music-lesson: I had nearly forgotten the Norths since the day I first saw Gilbert in Cotswoldbury.

I went into the little parlour, where Hetty was laboriously counting the bars of an easy piece I had given her. She did not see me at first, and went on perseveringly with a passage she could not render fluently, simply because she had mistaken her fingering; and I saw that she was paler than usual, and that the traces of tears were still upon her face. Also, as she toiled on, and counted and re-counted the troublesome bars, I noticed a sort of light, as of determined and half-forced bravery in her soft brown eyes, and a look of weary thought upon the childish brow.

"Hetty, Hetty love! What is it?" For again the brown eyes were swimming, and the small fingers were trembling on the keys. She turned and saw me, and, without a word of greeting, threw herself into my arms, and sobbed aloud. I was frightened at the vehemence of the child's grief.

"Hetty, my pretty one, what is troubling you? Will you not tell 'friend Maggie?'" That was my cognomen at the cottage.

With an amount of self-control that would have done honour to a woman grown, she drove back the ready tears, and spoke quietly. I am not sure whether I ought to talk about it first, Maggie. Mamma and papa are in great trouble. They will tell you themselves, I dare say."

I commended the prudence of their young daughter, and then I asked her if she were seeking consolation from her trouble—whatever it might be—in music.

"Oh, no!" she replied, quickly: "I cannot play well enough to give myself or anybody else any pleasure. Music was not born in me, as it was in you and Gussie; and I am not sure that I like it very much. I like listening to it; but I do not care for my own strumming. Still, I *must* learn to play, you see."

"I really do *not* see, Hetty. I think you will succeed best as a linguist,—you learn languages very quickly, and you enjoy the study; and it is not essential that every young lady should be able to perform, in some fashion or other, on the pianoforte."

"But you said I *could* learn, Maggie, though I have not a fine ear."

"Certainly you can learn; but it will cost you much time and great pains, and you will never be a brilliant performer. The question is, whether it is worth while to take so much trouble for so small a result; though, of course, that is as your parents wish."

"It is worth while, Maggie;—you will understand presently. Maggie, darling, I *must* learn everything!"

"My dear little Hetty, what has put such ambition into your head? Are you going to emulate Madame de Stäel, of whom you are so fond?"

"Ah, no, Maggie! I am not clever: I must do it all by dint of persevering hard labour. But I am going to be a governess,—I must not tell you any more. Let me take you up stairs to mamma: she is with baby. Baby must never want anything,—my baby sister must never have to work!"

Clearly something had happened! Troubles had invaded the Palace of Content: and I wondered curiously, as I followed Hetty upstairs, whether its atmosphere of peace, and trust, and calm would be disturbed as the sunshine passed away and the shadow fell!

I found Mrs. North looking paler than her daughter; but her lovely face, though a little sad, was quite serene; there was no cloud on the pure, ingenious brow, no gloom in the dark, earnest eyes that gravely but lovingly met mine.

"Sit down, Margaret," she said softly. "Baby has just gone off. I will lay her in her cot in a minute, and then we will talk. It is a long time since we saw you last."

"Yes, I have been very neglectful. But I have been very busy—strangely busy, dear Mrs. North."

Mrs. North did not answer, for she was occupied in laying the little one in her cradle-bed; and she knelt by it, gently rocking it, more and more slowly each second, and singing a low, sweet tune so quietly that at last it died away in whispers. How beautiful a picture they made—that fair, gentle mother, and that tiny, wax-like creature, with one wee finger clasped around the raven ringlet that had to be most gradually loosened! The grave, sweet matron face and the sleep-flushed babe!—what true poetry was in the tender gaze as it bent so lovingly above the unconscious slumberer!

"Now, tell me what has made you so strangely busy," began Mrs. North, when we were seated in the parlour, and her busy fingers were at work upon a little frock.

"I have left the school-room," I replied,—"left it quite unexpectedly; and, really, spending one's evenings in 'society,' as we call it, takes so much out of one that it is all one can do to find leisure for necessary duties."

"Miss Hollingsworth came on Saturday to say good-bye to us, and she told us how much you were engaged. William was wearying for his pupil; he could not imagine what had become of her!"

How much had Miss Hollingsworth told them? I wondered. Had she paved the way for the confidences she wished me to make?

Before, however, I could frame a question to my mind, Mrs. North introduced another subject. "Holly seemed to hint that you were in some kind of trouble, and I was thinking about it this very morning, and wondering whether I had better write to you, when the postman came, and brought us a great trouble of our own."

"I am so sorry, dear Mrs. North. May I know what it is?"

"Perhaps I ought not to call it a *great* trouble, for far worse might have betided. It is only a money trouble, and what money mars money may mend, some day; if *never*, it is not so great a matter, since there are far more precious things than gold and silver that may be scattered and reft away. It might have been my dear husband; it might have been one of my children: I thank God that He has spared to me all my real treasures."

"Money troubles are very fretting though, I should think."

"Precisely,—they are fretting and wearying; and I should fancy if one allowed them to get the mastery they might lower the tone of the mind, and make one captious and irritable. It is, however, exactly that which has come upon us. The bank in which all our little income was invested has failed—we are just paupers, Margaret; for if they make calls upon the shareholders all we have must be given up." And the tears, in spite of her brave tone, stole into her eyes as she glanced around the pretty room with its plain but tasteful furniture. "But we must hope for the best," she continued, quietly. "God, who has brought us so far on our way, will not desert us now. This is sent, I doubt not, as a trial of our faith. But there is William coming up the walk, and he must not see tears; Hetty, love, run and bathe your face—it is such a tell-tale little visage when you have been crying."

Mr. North came in looking tired, but otherwise very much as usual. He bent down and kissed his wife with more than his ordinary tenderness; then, sitting down by her and watching the swift-moving fingers, he said, "Have you told friend Maggie what has befallen us?"

"Yes; and I am so grieved, Mr. North," I hastened to reply. "I wish I were a rich woman—as rich as old Miss Chamberlayne, who, as report says, does not know how to dispose of her surplus income."

"And you would fill our hands with sovereigns and bank-notes, I know, Maggie! We thank you quite as much as if you really gave them. But never wish for wealth, my child, if God see fit not to bestow it. After all, riches are very comparative: *I* was rich, comparatively speaking, yesterday—or, at least, I thought I was, for I had enough to live on in a quiet way—enough, that is, when supplemented by my writing. To-day I have literally nothing, and, as a shareholder in the defunct bank, I am, or may be, seriously involved. Well, thank God for all His goodness! It is the same hand that fills the lap and empties the store; and it is a hand that never errs. We shall do very well yet, I dare say, little woman!"

"The little woman looked up with a cheery smile. "Oh, yes, William! Think how much worse it might have been! If this had happened three years ago, when your health was so delicate, when you never could work without bringing on those torturing headaches, it would have been infinitely more depressing; though I dare say we should have found a silver lining to that black cloud even. Poor Hetty was very much cast down at first: I really think that the idea of baby not having the new frocks we had promised her distressed her most; that baby should be clothed in purple and fine linen, and fare sumptuously, seems to her only in the fitness of things. However, Hetty is going to be a governess, and earn a little fortune for herself."

"No, no," cried Hetty, who had just returned; "no, mamma, dear, not for myself—for you, and papa, and the little ones. The worst of it is, I am so small—nobody thinks I am as old as I am; else I am sure that I could teach very little children now. And while I taught I should learn myself. I am too old for play; I should be studying at every spare minute and picking up every bit of odd information by the way. I could get up early, and I need not go to bed at

half-past eight any longer. I think I might sit up an hour later now I am turned twelve. Maggie will tell me the things I ought to study most. I sang an Italian verb to baby this morning, Maggie. I put the book on the table, and looked into it as I walked about—for baby cried the minute I stood still or ceased singing; so instead of a nursery rhyme I sang, '*Io ho, tu hài, egli ha,*' and all the rest of it, you know, down to '*eglino avèssero!*'"

"Brave child," said her mother, "to sing while her heart was so heavy."

"But I did cry afterwards, mamma; I could not help it."

"There was no need that you should help it. There is no bravery in stoicism; true courage does not consist in crushing out one's feelings, but in repressing them till the time comes when we may unselfishly indulge them. That was just what you did, Hetty, my darling; your bore up grandly and were mamma's right hand till she was ready to take baby; then, very naturally, you gave way a little."

"I cannot bear for papa to have to work hard," said Hetty, huskily—the tears swimming once more in her eyes.

"Why not, little maid?" interposed Mr. North, gaily. "Why is your papa more to be pitied than a hundred other papas."

"Because you are not strong. It is your free life among the hills and woods, and your long walks, that keep off those dreadful pains in the head you used to have when you sat in your study and wrote books. The doctor has said so many times. If I were only ten years older I could begin to keep a school at once. I wonder whether Mrs. Crofton would send me Gussie and Rosa."

"But as you are not ten years older, but a week or two the junior of Gussie, it cannot be, my earnest little daughter. Now, do not vex yourself about me; I am far better and stronger than ever I hoped to be, and God will give me strength to do all that is needful: so cheer up, pussy. You surely did not think you were to have all the courage and

all the labour yourself? And, Mary, *you* will not be too anxious!"

"She laid her head on his shoulder, and the satiny, raven curls and the tawny locks and beard were intermingled, and her voice was just a little unsteady, and I could see her hand trembling, as she replied, "Only if we have to leave this dear home, William—if we must go away from Ashe End."

"My darling, our home will be just where our Father chooses it shall be. So long as we are together, and our children are with us, we must not murmur, if we are reminded that here we have no abiding city. Perhaps, dear, we have made this too much our resting-place—perhaps it has been too entirely our palace of content: we have been so satisfied with our pleasant earthly home that we have forgotten that we are only strangers and pilgrims in a foreign land. Courage, my wife; all will yet be well. We cannot, must not, doubt it, since it is our *Father* who will order all things for us."

"I almost forgot my own troubles in sympathising with my friends' anxieties; but when I began once more to dwell upon all that was so sorely perplexing me, I thought I could better bear the position of the Norths than my own. Come what might, the father, mother, and children would endure it together; they might lose their earthly all, but nothing could make them bankrupt in mutual love and reverence; nothing, I believed, could shake their trust in the God who gave and who took away, and while they kept this perfect faith in their heavenly Father and in each other, nothing, it seemed to me, could give them lasting pain. And so I wished that their trouble were mine, because it would be so much easier to bear.

Ah! the old mistake—the willingness to run any other race than that which is set before us—the readiness to carry any other cross than that which is laid upon our shoulders. But the gracious God knows better than we, and He, the beneficent Father, has patience with His foolish, wayward children, and loves us through all our folly and our wilfulness,

and so we have to run our own race, and to bear our own cross, which in the end turns out to be the very race for which we were best qualified—the very cross we needed.

The afternoon shadows were falling before I had made Mrs. North understand something of my difficulties; and the only advice she could give me was to cast my burden on the Lord, to ask His direction daily, and to be very prudent. Her last words were, "Take courage, Margaret—it will all be made plain in time; only *trust*, and commit your course to Him, and by-and-by you will reach the haven where you would be."

I started at those words, for they were an echo of Gilbert's; but I made no rejoinder, for the twilight shades were deepening, and I feared the lamps would be lighted before I reached the town. Mr. North was not very well, and I would not suffer him to accompany me; and, indeed, I felt I could not just then take him from his wife and daughter. So I hurried on down the hill, till I reached the broad London-road, and I was just at the outskirts of Cotswoldbury when a party of young men, with their guns in their hands, overtook me. And with that inimitable impudence in which the creatures of a certain genus glory, one of them accosted me, and another, drawing my arm within his, informed me that he would take me to his club to dine. I was greatly terrified; for they were all slightly excited with drinking, and I did not know to what extent I might be insulted.

I was addressing them in a most indignant tone, and holding myself in a very haughty attitude, when some one dashed down the hill behind us, and over the style, exclaiming, "What the deuce! I am sure I know that voice. Who have you got there, Clavering?"

I knew that voice—knew it for my cousin Tom's; and in another minute he had sent the man he called Clavering reeling against the wall, and I was under his protection.

"I didn't know I was poaching on your preserves, old fellow," said Clavering, half amused and half sulky.

"This lady is my cousin," said Tom, with a great deal

more dignity than I had ever known him assume—"my cousin; and a member of my father's family. Next time you want to frighten a girl, choose a daughter of the people, please; not a gentlewoman."

"Whew!" said Clavering, "what charming morality! It is just possible that the young sempstress or servant-maid *may* be as virtuous and squeamish as the young peeress."

I thought so myself; but Tom, after he had scolded me for being out so late alone, remarked that of course Clavering and his set, in the dusk, and seeing me unaccompanied, took me for a tradesman's daughter, and they meant no harm.

He seemed quite amazed when I replied that the "tradesman's daughter" had equal claims with myself as regarded the points we were discussing. Alas, for the chivalry of the nineteenth century!

CHAPTER XXIX.

MORE ADVICE.

Of course I was well lectured for the imprudence I had committed, though the lecture was mild enough, compared with what it would have been a few weeks before. Moreover, I felt that I really did deserve reproof, since the London-road and the High-street of Cotswoldbury were certainly not places where young ladies of eighteen were expected to walk in the twilight without due escort; and I resolved most fervently that nothing should induce me to expose myself to the like unpleasantness in future. And, seeing that Clavering and his set were in the circle of Tom Crofton's chosen friends, I did not feel much admiration for my cousin's social taste, nor much confidence in his principles.

But, as I said, I was only mildly lectured, for the world in which I lived was turned so topsy-turvy that I began to think I might really commit petty naughtinesses like other people, without incurring the severe upbraidings that had hitherto been my lot, on the merest supposition of my straying either to the right hand or to the left.

Mrs. Crofton only said in conclusion, "Next time you expect to be detained at Maple Cottage, just tell one of the servants to come and meet you—or, better still, let Tom know when you wish to return, and he will be glad to come and fetch you."

"No, indeed," I thought; "not if I never go to Maple Cottage any more. I could not avoid his escort to-night—indeed I should be most ungrateful did I not confess that I was extremely glad to see him; but I will take care it does not occur again."

But it did occur again—so far as Tom was concerned—very quickly. The next day, Saturday, while Gussie and I were changing books at the library, he came into the shop, and advised us to read "Handy Andy," and "Ten Thousand Topsail Sheet-blocks," or something very like it, and he selected the "Dog Fiend" for his own especial edification, and mortally offended Gussie by offering to purchase for her "The True History of Mother Bunch." Gussie, who had just taken to Mrs. Hemans's poetry, and had expressed a wish to be allowed to read "Corinne" with Hetty North, felt herself completely outraged, and replied with dignity, "You can buy it for Rosa, if you like; though I am not sure that she will care about it." Gussie had a would-be grown-up air about her that was mightily diverting, when she chose to put it on. Then, of course, Tom walked home with us, for it was about luncheon time; and just as we reached the gates we met Mrs. Crofton and Sibyl driving with Gilbert and Mr. Saunderson. They all smiled graciously on us, excepting the old gentleman, who scowled at us as if we had just then personally affronted him, and as they passed before us along the drive, Tom said—

"I don't envy Tredgold: I would rather be as poor as a church mouse than have such a wife as Sibyl will make him. It will be great fun to go and see them when the honeymoon is well over, and Sib is shining out in her true colours, and Gilbert is just getting disenchanted. The miserable fellow! he will not be able to say his soul is his own."

"You do not know Gilbert Tredgold," I replied. "Un-

less he is greatly altered, he is not the man to succumb to any woman's temper; but are you sure that he intends Sibyl to be his wife?"

"It really looks very much like it—that is all I can say; but how he can like such a wax-doll sort of beauty I cannot imagine. I hate that smooth golden hair, and those turquoise blue eyes, and a skin that looks as if it would spoil, like a bonnet, if it were caught in a heavy shower. No, no, *Margarita bella*, a 'nut-brown maid' for me."

"With plenty of 'tin,' of course?" I remarked, half-amused, and half-wondering whether a compliment was paid to my own tawny face and ebon curls.

"No; I don't care about tin *now*. I did once; but that is all over, Margaret. The wife I choose must be handsome, spirited, clever, good, of course a gentlewoman, and a capital musician. She must be younger than myself, of course—about five years, say, not more. I don't want a baby, or a mere bread-and-butter girl. As for money, I do not care a jot about it."

"That is quite a new decision," I replied, drily.

"It is one I came to about two months ago, and I had a talk with the governor. It was all your doing."

"All my doing!" I exclaimed in great affright. "Oh, Tom! what can you mean?"

"Don't you remember my telling you what a lot of scrapes I was in—money scrapes, you know? And didn't you advise me to go to the governor, and tell him all about it, instead of borrowing afresh at nobody knows what per cent.? Well, I took your advice and went, Margaret; and we had the very jolliest row you can imagine. I never saw my father in such a rage: he vowed he would disinherit me; he declared I should bring down his gray hairs with sorrow to the grave, and all that sort of thing, you know. It doesn't mean much, and governors always say it when they get aggravated; but it is decidedly unpleasant to listen to—particularly when you know you are in a fix, and can only say, 'I am sure I am very sorry, sir; I had no idea it was half as much,' &c."

"But what had your confession to do with—?"

"With getting married? Oh! my father asked me if I had any objection to wedded happiness; and I replied at once, 'None in the world, provided I might have the girl of my choice.' But of course there was the question of supplies to be considered, and the beloved *pater* proposed Miss Agatha Druce, as being a very fine young woman, and also as being in the enjoyment of an independent fortune! But, Margaret, I replied that I had no opinion of double alliances, and that I would see the fair Agatha drowned before I would make her Mrs. Crofton! At last, after a very tempest of a row, we came to something like an arrangement. I told them, for my mother joined action when the fray was at its height, that I would marry one person or nobody at all; and as they want to see me settled down, and as sober as a judge, they were forced to give way. So that is just how the matter stands at present: but you do not ask me, Margaret, who the lady is who has enchained my long-wandering affections?"

"Because I really do not care to know. It cannot be of any consequence to me."

"Now, that is too abominable, Margaret, when you know—"

"I know nothing; and if you keep me here, Tom, I shall have no luncheon, and I am really half-starving!" And, without giving him time to reply, I seized Gussie by the hand, and ran with her into the house.

If I were not greatly mistaken, I understood now that I was to be given to Tom as the price of his reformation. He had been too freely indulged in his youth to endure even the slightest restraint in manhood, and he was resolved on having his own way in this particular emergency. Strangely enough, he had elected that I should be his wife, and his parents were fain to yield to his persuasions; for well they knew that if they refused consent he would either do his best to win me over without their sanction, or he would, in revenge, plunge desperately into greater excesses than before. So they had agreed, I doubted not, to ratify

his choice, and pay his debts once more, and settle upon him a suitable income, on condition of his renouncing evil ways and bad companions, and settling down as a steady married man, and a respectable member of society.

And so I was to be bought and sold! No, indeed! nothing should ever induce me to listen for one moment to addresses I so thoroughly despised!

I was so engrossed by my own thoughts that I forgot all about the luncheon which I had professed to anticipate so eagerly; and Gussie was sent presently to fetch me down. They were all at table when I entered, and there was a great clatter of knives and forks, and a perfect Babel of tongues, every one talking fast and eagerly. Only one vacant place remained—the one I should have chosen last, or not at all, had any choice remained; but while I hesitated, Mrs. Crofton said, smilingly, "There is your seat, Margaret; we have saved it for you." I need not say it was the seat next to Tom's; and what could I do but take it without more ado? Tom had really *said* nothing yet, and it would not do to proceed to extremities on mere surmises, however well founded they might be. I could not well appear too conscious; so I moved quietly to the empty chair, feeling all the time that Mr. Saunderson's sternest gaze was fixed upon me.

I thought as I glided past him, that I heard him mutter to himself the word "*coquette*." And my heart felt sore within me; for I knew that I did not deserve so cruel a misnomer; and he was one of the last persons by whom I should have wished to be unfairly judged. Tom helped me to potted grouse with an air of devotion that spoke as plainly as an air could speak, and I felt as if I were watching the weaving of a skilful web in which I was to be involved, and from which I saw not how I could escape.

"We were talking about the sea-side," said Tom, in a low voice, as if he were uttering some of those tender nothings in which lovers delight. "We think we had better go at once, before it gets too late."

"Is it not too late already?" I asked aloud, in a tone that all around might hear.

"Oh, no!" was Tom's half-whispered rejoinder, and he looked as if he were making all kinds of gentle protestations. "It is just the time of all others. Besides, the smallpox has broken out at the bottom of the town, and mamma is afraid for you and Sibyl, to say nothing of the children. We were just settling to go next week; and what place can be better than Cleeve-super-Mare?"

"I would rather go to St. Eldred's," I said, discontentedly.

"Then you shall go." And, raising his voice to regular conversation pitch, he addressed Mrs. Crofton, "Mother, Margaret prefers to go to St. Eldred's; so it is there we must go. Why should she go to Cleeve if she would rather be elsewhere?"

I felt frightened at this audacious speech; for I had not yet grown accustomed to my new position as a creature privileged to have likes and dislikes, and freely to express them as a daughter of the house. I had been a poor fettered dependent so long, that I quite failed as yet to appreciate in all its length and breadth the full liberty of the British subject. Prior to that eventful day of Gilbert's advent among us, any preference of mine would have been ignored, frowned down, as impudent, presumptuous, or treated with contempt.

Even now I fancied a flush of vexation passed over Mrs. Crofton's countenance; but she only said quite blandly, "My dear boy, it is quite natural that you should desire to please Margaret, and, of course, I should be delighted to meet her wishes; but I am not sure that St. Eldred's would be quite so convenient as Cleeve-super-Mare. What do you say, Sibyl?"

"Oh, I say St. Eldred's," she answered, quickly, her fair face glowing as she spoke;—surely some of the old radiant girlish beauty had returned of late. "Think what a pleasure it would be to Margaret! And besides, Mr. Tredgold has given me such a description of the shore, and the lovely country round North Combe, that I am wild to see

it. Then, again, mamma, Cleeve is getting such a fashionable place; one might almost as well stay at Cotswoldbury if it were not for the sea; the band is better here, and nothing can equal our own Promenade. St. Eldred's for me, mamma, please, if you put it to the vote."

Mrs. Crofton was evidently non-plussed, and I hastened to say, "I beg you will not dream of deranging any plan on my account, ma'am. It was a thoughtless speech,—and I merely said I would rather go to St. Eldred's than to Cleeve; I had no idea the remark would be repeated."

"We will talk about it presently, my dear," said Mrs. Crofton, good-humouredly, "but as our good friends Mr. Saunderson and Mr. Tredgold will go with us, we must of course consult them."

"Oh, St. Eldred's let it be," said Sibyl, in a low, clear whisper, fixing her lovely blue eyes beseechingly on Gilbert's bright dark orbs. "Fancy the rambles and the scrambles on that delicious beach. And I should see the Tor, and Rhudrhoe Point; and you could show me the very spots where the 'Little Gipsy' went down, and where the 'Hirondelle' struck on those fatal *Serrars*."

"But St. Eldred's is a dull place in itself. Of course *I* think there is no spot on earth to compare with it; but Cleeve is far gayer, and, of course, more fashionable."

"I am sick of fashion," said Sibyl. Which statement, though I utterly disbelieved it at the time, was, I dare say, a true one, since she had spent full five years in the pursuit of frivolous pleasures, in a dreary round of fashionable gaieties, finding only as the sequence, "vanity and vexation of spirit."

Mr. Saunderson, being appealed to, declared that he would not go to St. Eldred's: he had made up his mind for Cleeve-super-Mare, and thither would he go, let who would stay away. Of course after that there was no longer any question about my old haunts. Gilbert said nothing, and Sibyl sweetly acquiesced, and began to anticipate a thousand delights in the nearer watering-place. It was definitely settled before we rose from table, that we should all of us

migrate to the coast in the course of the ensuing week, and my uncle was to go down first to secure apartments, or, if it were possible, a whole furnished house.

I went up once to see Mrs. North, and found her looking ill and dispirited; for the baby who had till now been the healthiest little creature possible, began to be attacked by the sorrows of teething, and Mr. North was in London on business, and he had left home with one of those severe headaches that always alarmed his family.

"But, however," she continued, having finished the brief recital of her anxieties, "I ought to be very thankful, for he has some prospect of regular work,—work that need not, I think, take us from Ashe End if only they will not sell up our poor little Lares and Penates. It is editorial work,—just what will suit William, if his poor head can but stand the regular application. Editors, you know, can never afford to be unwell; the public expects of them perennial health and spirits, and undeviating profundity and brilliance."

"Is it a weekly or a monthly affair, a magazine or a newspaper?"

"Neither; it is a scientific journal,—something between a gazette and a magazine: it is just what William can do well, and what he will do with right good will, *if* only his health will be equal to the demands made upon it. But, dear me! what a faithless creature I am! I am just as foolish as the man who moaned because his purse was empty, though he had a handsome balance at his banker's."

"How so?"

"Because I am forgetting that it is *promised* that as our day our strength shall be. I am like the faithless Israelites who wanted to gather up manna for to-day and to-morrow too."

"It is very natural."

"I know that; but the spiritual man must in such cases strive against the natural. Now, then, tell me about this sudden move: when do you say you are going to Cleeve?"

"On Thursday, I believe,—and to-day is Tuesday;

so I shall not see you again, dear Mrs. North, till we return."

"Of course Mr. Tom Crofton accompanies you?"

"Of course. I would propose staying at home, but I know it would not be permitted. Besides, if I stayed, he would stay too."

"Exactly. Now, Margaret, my advice to you is—let him propose or explain himself as soon as ever he likes. It is of no use playing at hide-and-seek in such cases. Sooner or later he will speak; and I should say the sooner the better: for, having once rejected his addresses, you are of course justified in treating him with manifest coldness if he persist in his unwelcome attentions. As it is, you are most disagreeably situated; for, as he is your cousin, and you have always been to a certain extent on familiar terms, you can scarcely repulse him till he gives you decided cause for doing so. Nothing is more annoying to a girl than to be taunted with having said 'No,' when she has not been asked to say 'Yes.'"

"The very difficulty that has presented itself; and, after all, you know, I am not quite certain that Tom is not merely amusing himself—just keeping his hand in, while no better speculation is afoot; for even his mother confesses that he is an incorrigible flirt."

"I need not ask you if you are fully determined to say '*No!*'"

"My dear Mrs. North! As if there could be a moment's question! I do not respect Tom, to begin with."

"And with that you may end, my dear! Want of esteem is a full and sufficient reason for refusing any man. Even if you were inclined to love him, I should counsel you to give him up, though how any woman can love one whom she does not esteem and reverence is more than I can divine."

"More than I can either. Only if one loved and found out one's mistake when it was too late!"

"That, Margaret, must be a misery almost unendurable. May God preserve you from it! The anguish of buried love or unrequited love can be nothing compared with that which mourns a sure *unworthiness*."

"Yet still, having once given one's affections, I suppose they could not be withdrawn?"

"I cannot tell, for I was never tried. So dreadful an alternative I well believe can never be my lot; my husband was a true Christian man when first I learned to care for him. Trust me, Margaret, there is no safeguard but that. A man may be moral, amiable, intellectual, high-minded, all that is pure and lovely, as the world counts purity and loveliness, but not to be relied on unless his principle of goodness is founded on a rock—on *the Rock* I should have said."

"That Rock being Christ?"

"Certainly. In *His* love there is a constraining power with which no other spring of action can even for a second compare. Marry a Christian man, Margaret, if you wish to be happy."

"But I am not a Christian myself."

"My poor child, how much happiness you miss! I do not wonder you are perplexed and very often sore at heart."

"I have so many things to make me so. If I were a Christian my troubles would still remain."

"They would. But then you would have an Almighty Friend, a Comforter, abiding with you always. Now you walk in darkness; then the light would shine:—if not earthly light, that which is far better, the light of your heavenly Father's countenance. What are you thinking of so intently?"

"I was thinking that if I once loved anybody, with all my heart, as I should love if I loved at all, I know I should go on loving, even if all kinds of unworthiness were proved against him. Mind, I could not begin to love without first esteeming; but if I were mistaken and I found it out, when all my heart was given, I do not think it would make any difference. I think my love would be

> "'Such love as quits not misery's side,
> Nor drops from guilt its ivy-like embrace,
> Nor turns away from death's its pale heroic face.'"

"I believe it, Margaret. Yours is no ordinary nature.

You will have trials and temptations that milder and weaker spirits know nothing of. May God guide you into all peace! He only can. Good bye, dear child, and let this troublesome Tom have his say at once."

CHAPTER XXX.

TOM PROPOSES.

AND so we were comfortably located in a handsome furnished house at Cleeve-super-Mare; and it did my heart good to gaze once more upon the watery world; to see the great waves, surging high in the equinoctial spring-tides, leap upon the rocks; to hear the solemn music, the "billowy anthem," that would echo till the end of time; and to meet the sturdy blast as it came up with fresh briny odour from the broad Atlantic, and made havoc with my curls and reft my bonnet from its moorings, and carried it far away among the tide-pools of the shore.

Our house was a detached villa, commanding lovely views of sea, and coast, and hill,—the sea being, I must tell you, not the boundless waste of waters to which I had been accustomed at St. Eldred's, but a noble estuary, eight or nine miles in breadth. It was none the less lovely, that one could see on clear days a purple line of wavy hills, like shadowland, upon the other side. As for the heights about Cleeve-super-Mare, they were breezy and beautiful exceedingly; and the inland view, gazing southward, towards the Vale of Avalon, was more enchanting than words of mine can tell.

Mr. Saunderson and Gilbert had lodgings very near to us; the greater part of the day they really spent at Mendip House, our own "marine residence," as my cousin Tom loved to call it.

Tom became suddenly very steady and almost rational; indeed he spoke and acted in so sensible a style, that I began to accuse myself of having on some points misre-

presented him to my friends at Maple Cottage. He did not consort with the "fast" set of men, who, like ourselves, had come down to the shore for the sake of saline breezes, or for fashion's sake, or for whim's sake,—it was not easy to say which. A temporary yachting club had been got up; but Tom did not join it. "The fellows were too rollicking for him," he said. "As for himself, he was tired of an idle life, and he really thought he should seriously set to work, and read for the Bar."

My uncle and Mrs. Crofton were delighted. At last their darling son and heir had sown his wild oats; henceforward, he would only cultivate the choicest wheat. And now Mrs. Crofton began to praise him whenever she had an opportunity; and whenever we were left alone together she had something to say about the future. I had not only to listen to accounts of his precocious childhood and his youthful wit, but to previsions of a day not yet arrived, when Tom, married to the girl of his choice, would prove himself a model husband—all that the most exacting and fastidious of wives could reasonably require.

"With all my heart," I thought. "If Tom becomes a good husband and a respectable *paterfamilias*, so much the better for him; but it is nothing, and shall be nothing to me personally."

One afternoon, scarcely a week after our arrival at Cleeve, there was a discussion about the various expeditions we wished to make. There was to be a riding party, and a walking party, and a boating party. Dinner was just over; for we kept early hours, and had given ourselves up to a generally free and easy style of living. We had running meals, so to speak; nobody who was hungry was to wait for anybody, and Mr. Saunderson and Gilbert were in and out the whole day long. You and I will go botanizing," said Gussie to me, coaxingly. "We will take our specimen-case, and go miles along the shore. You know Mr. North said we should find the samphire if we explored the rocks towards Woodport. Ah, I wish we had Mr. North here and Hetty!"

I wished so too, but I said nothing; for just then Gilbert

came up to the window where I was standing. It was the first time for weeks that he had voluntarily approached me, indeed, for the last fortnight we had said very little to each other. I saw that he avoided me, and I, too, could be proud, and hold myself purposely aloof. He had heard Gussie speaking of the samphire, and he came forward now to say something to her, not to me.

"The samphire grows on those rocks below the old castle, Gussie; but you and Miss Torrington will scarcely be able to gather it. It is quite above your reach, and climbing would be dangerous, if not impracticable."

"Come with us then," replied Gussie, with that comfortable disregard of the proprieties in which young ladies of her age may blamelessly indulge. "You might scramble where we could not; and I must have some samphire,—the veritable *crithmum maritimum*. Come with us now, Gilbert. Can't you leave Sib for a single evening?"

Gilbert coloured furiously. "Miss Crofton and Mr. Saunderson chiefly make arrangements," he said, still addressing Gussie; "and, of course, I accompany Mr. Saunderson; they are going out in a boat this evening."

"And you with them? You might come with us for once, Gilbert. And Margaret your old friend too. If I were Margaret I should be offended; and I think she is not pleased."

He looked at me quickly then; and with burning cheeks I hastened to reply, "Gussie is very silly, Mr. Tredgold; she lets her tongue run too fast, and I must lecture her about it. She is getting into a bad habit of saying all she thinks, and a great deal that she does not think."

"Oh, Margaret!" remonstrated Gussie; "that is not kind,—you know I never tell stories."

"I know you do not, dear; but you say things that come uppermost, without thinking about them."

"But *are* you offended, Miss Torrington," inquired Gilbert, hesitatingly.

"I have nothing to be offended about," I replied, coldly. "I beg you will not take literally anything Gussie says, Mr. Tredgold?"

"Why do you call me Mr. Tredgold?"

"Why do you call me Miss Torrington?"

"Because I left you a little girl, and I find you grown into a young lady; and I would not dare to presume on old privileges."

"The same reasons will apply to myself; we are not amusing ourselves now, with the 'Little Gipsy' curtseying in the shallows of the creek."

"No, indeed. Poor 'Little Gipsy!' Those *were* happy days."

"Your days have been happier since, surely?"

"I think not. I had much to contend with in those days, and, for a mere boy, as I was, I had undue anxieties. But my wants were few, my pleasures, though simple, were perfect in their kind, and I thoroughly enjoyed my life. No; I have never been quite so happy as then I was. It might have been better for me if I had been left to *struggle* upwards in the career I was trying to mark out for myself. I am not certain, Margaret, that what people esteem my rare 'good fortune' is really such. But Mr. Saunderson is very kind; I have no cause to complain. I only mean that if I had had to make my way it might have strengthened me more—it might have taught me more. You will think I am a foolish fellow, quarrelling with my own destiny like a hero of romance. What is it, Master Cuddie?"

"Sibyl and Mr. Saunderson are waiting for you. They are on the beach."

"One moment. Run away, Cuddie. You see to-night I cannot accept Gussie's invitation; they expect me: else—"

"Pray go at once; you should not keep Sibyl waiting. Gussie and I love our solitary rambles."

"We get so few now," said Gussie, discontentedly. "Tom is always coming with us. He never used to care about walking with us till lately. Only this morning I told him I thought that he thought that you were his sister as much as Sib and I. But he said, 'No, Gussie, not *my* sister—something far better than that; but *your* sister, I hope, always.' I don't see exactly what he meant; for if you were my sister, you must be his, you know."

"That does not follow," said Gilbert; and without another word he ran away.

"Now, let us go, Margaret," said Gussie, with whom, just then, I felt as heartily angry as I had ever felt in the old antagonistic days. But ere I could tutor myself to reply quietly, another personage appeared upon the scene,—my cousin Tom, who wanted to know my intentions for the evening. "Gussie and I are going botanizing."

"Take me instead of Gussie."

I was going to object, when suddenly Mrs. North's counsel recurred to my mind, and I replied, "You can join us, if you please."

"No, indeed, Margaret! Two are company,—three are not, you know. Let Gussie go and help Cuddie and Rosa with their mud castle on the shore. Come along, there's a good girl; you know I want to have it out with you,—we'll settle everything to-night. It's no use beating about the bush in this way."

"No, indeed!" I thought; "and we will settle everything to-night, though the settling may not be so entirely to your mind as you anticipate, my too-confident cousin!"

"Come along, then. Shall we go to the old castle, or to Walton Cliffs, or where?"

"Anywhere you like."

"Then we'll say the cliffs,—we shall have them nearly to ourselves."

We walked along for some little time in silence; then Tom said, "Ah! there's Gilbert's boat. I hope he and Miss Sibyl are enjoying themselves. But it must be an awful bore to have that old fogy always with them. We shouldn't like an ill-tempered, frumpy old buffer to be always interfering with our love-making; should we, Margaret?"

"If we were making love, probably not."

"If we *were!* Why aren't we now?"

"I should say *not* decidedly."

"Come, now, Margaret, don't be skittish, and don't be prudish. 'Modesty highly adorns beauty,' and all that sort of thing, you know; and if you had been half a quarter as sharp

after a husband as Sib is, and has been these years, you never would have had me for your devoted lover, I can tell you."

"Tom, I really did not know that you were my lover at all. You are just my cousin, and—"

"By the powers! but that's too much to say to a fellow, Margaret. Here, I've been doing the agreeable for weeks and weeks, and you've accepted my attentions: you know you have. You can never mean to jilt me now you've gone so far?"

"So *far*, Tom? I have not got one single step in the direction you indicate. This is the first word you have ever said to me."

Tom lifted up his eyes piously. "Really, Margaret, you are carrying it a little too far. Dear me, everybody knows we are going to be married. Of course Mr. Saunderson and Gilbert know it. It's been a settled thing ever since they came among us,—as settled as it is with him and Sib, foolish fellow! And all the servants know it, and all the people that visit at Crofton Lawn, and lots of folks in this place. It's as settled as anything ever was. And I swear, Margaret, that I'll make you a good husband. I've given up all my naughty ways, and all for your sake, too; and I'll give up anything you don't like—indeed, I will,—anything but smoking, that is;—for you are the handsomest girl I know, Margaret dear; and I am proud of you. I told Clavering what was up the other day, after you had that little scrimmage in the London-road; and he congratulated me, and said I should have a splendid woman for my wife; and I agree with him,—that I do! So now, my dear, when shall it be?"

"When shall what be?"

"Oh,' what coquettes you girls are! You know well enough. Why, our wedding-day, of course. Come now, say when?"

"Never, Tom! I could no more be your wife than I could be the hangman's!"

"Complimentary that. But you are only talking nonsense. You will be my wife before Christmas-day is here.

See if you are not. What on earth do you think the governor and my mother would say to you if you turned stupid now? Why, it's all been as clear as possible. If you meant to throw me overboard, why did you let me play the fool so long?—why did not you say at the beginning that you didn't mean to have me?"

"Girls do not generally tell a young man that they intend to refuse him *before* he proposes. This is the first time you have spoken intelligibly; and intelligibly I reply, I do not love you, Cousin Tom, and I will not marry you."

"But I say you will marry me, Cousin Margaret."

I began to feel furiously angry, and the quiet tone, in which there was a world of determination and no bluster, frightened me. I withdrew my arm from his, saying, "It is absurd to talk so. In this country no one can be forced to marry. No one can shut me up in a convent, or consign me to durance vile, if I persist in saying '*No!*'"

"But you will not persist in saying '*No*,' my beautiful Margaret; you will say, '*Yes*, which is what you really mean now. It really is good fun to see you look so haughty; you do it charmingly; you have the very air and aspect of an outraged queen. But enough is as good as a feast, and I have had enough, and more than enough, of this little game; so turn round, there's a good girl, and say, 'Tom, I am yours for life!' And here is a splendid ring I bought on purpose for you. Let me put it on the proper finger, and give me a kiss, and the whole thing is done, and we go home like two turtle-doves, to receive the parental benediction—which will grow stale if it isn't bestowed quickly,—it has been ready and waiting so long."

I was silent, doubtful what I should say next. Tom was getting impatient. "Come, now, I am really tired of shilly-shally. I shall take a kiss whether you give me permission or no. It's my *right* now I've spoken out."

"Kiss me at your peril!"

"Don't look in that way, Margaret. You scare me with your great angry eyes. I shall think you are in earnest if you go on."

"*You know* I am in earnest," I replied, indignantly.

"You can't be. The long and the short of it is, Margaret, you *must* be my wife! You are compromised, you know. If the engagement is broken off, what will people say?"

"That which never existed cannot be broken off; and I care nothing about what 'people' will say."

"A woman can't afford to care nothing,—so that is all *bosh*. And I say we *are* engaged. Didn't I speak to the governor about it, and didn't I tell you so only last Saturday week? Be honest now: did I not speak as plainly as a fellow could speak? didn't I describe yourself as the girl I had elected to be Mrs. Tom Crofton? Didn't I say she was a nut-brown maid, and five years younger than myself, and had no tin, but could play and sing splendidly,—didn't I now? I put it to your conscience!"

"You described a girl certainly; but you never said you were alluding to myself."

"But you knew it all the while. You tacitly accepted me then, Margaret,—you know you did; and so the thing is done. I told Gilbert Tredgold—"

"That you were engaged to me?"

"Of course I told him. I told him I was sweet upon you, and you on me, as soon as ever we grew intimate. I thought he seemed inclined to look you up himself; so, thinks I, the sooner there is a word said to you the better, my fine fellow. And I said it: I told him it was all arranged; and somehow he didn't seem to believe me, so I referred him to my mother, and she of course confirmed my statement, and the thing was done. And then, as Sib wanted the young man, and we all wanted her married out of the way, it was a good thing to let him see his way clear; he knew then who was appropriated, and who was not. He looks upon you as almost my wife, as is indeed the case."

"How could you tell him such a lie, Tom?"

"It was no lie. Heyday! you look quite pale. Did you want young Tredgold for yourself? Is that your little game?"

I sat down on the turf, and cried bitterly, to Tom's profound astonishment and consternation.

"To think now," he muttered to himself, "of her taking it in this way! I thought she would be delighted. I thought all girls liked to have a *beau*, and to get comfortably married; and here *she* is, crying as if she were certain of being an old maid! Come now, Margaret, I didn't mean to vex you: get up now, and be jolly. You couldn't have Gilbert Tredgold, you know, because he is in love with Sibyl; and, my stars! you had better not put your little finger in Sibyl's pie, or she'll give you the choice some day between a dose of strychnine and a dagger."

"Let us go home," I said, faintly. I was feeling very sick at heart,—not wavering for one moment in my intent, but feeling how utterly useless it was to sit there, and talk to a man who cared no more for my repulses than for the wailing of the sea-birds on the rocks. It was rapidly growing dark too, and the evening, which had been so fair and golden when we set out, was closing in gloomily enough. Heavy tempest-bearing clouds were rising slowly, and overspreading the blue sky; and the sea looked dull and leaden,—calm still along the shore, but already showing white crests of foam in mid-channel.

Sullenly Tom walked home beside me, and not a word did we exchange till we came within sight of the lighted windows of Mendip House; then he said, "If you will say you will think of it again, Margaret, I'll not tell my mother to-night. You'll find yourself rather in a fix, I fancy, when she does come to know what answer you have given me."

"If I thought for ten years, Tom, I should still arrive at the same conclusion. I do not mean to be unkind; I like you very well for my cousin, but you cannot be more."

"But you are unkind! You are wretchedly unkind, keeping me on in this way, and then flinging me over at last. Oh, Margaret! I do care for you as I never cared for any other woman; and if you will try me I will be as steady as old Time. We'll be a model couple, and I'll always—that

is, generally—go to church with you. *Won't* you try me, Margaret?"

"One cannot take a husband on trial, Tom; marriage is for life?"

"But you might take me on trial as a lover!"

"No, indeed; then you might justly accuse me of coquetry. It cannot be, Tom; think no more about it."

"I went straight to my room, and did not come down again that night. But about nine o'clock Mrs. Crofton appeared bearing a hot and fragrant cup of tea and some delicate slices of bread-and-butter. "Tom was anxious about me," she said. "We had strolled too far and I was overtired. Would I not come into the drawing-room and rest on the sofa? Tom seemed quite stupid in my absence." Then, taking sudden courage, I arose and told Mrs. Crofton what had passed during our walk, and that I could never be her daughter-in-law.

She turned very red and then very pale, and nearly a minute elapsed before she spoke; then she said, "Never mind, my dear, do not cry. I was quite prepared for this. You will think better of it presently. Only, Margaret, it is *quite settled that you will marry Tom!* This is but a lover's quarrel, and we know how charmingly they end. Both your uncle and myself have consented to this engagement, it is generally known; and, if I were you, I would not even pretend to wish to break it!"

"Mrs. Crofton," I cried, nearly beside myself, "I am not engaged; there never was any engagement. Tom never spoke till to-night; you know it quite well."

I spoke with passion, but she remained quite calm. She only tapped my cheek, saying, laughingly, "Just the way with you girls; you must give a little trouble, and wound, if you do not break, your lovers' hearts. Leonora and Captain Druce had quite a scene once, I remember; yet see how happy they are now. And I dare say I was not faultless in my own day. Don't cry, Margaret; it will all come right, and we will go up to town to choose your wedding clothes."

CHAPTER XXXI.

"TO BE, OR NOT TO BE."

I WAS roused next morning by Gussie, who was standing at my bed-side with my breakfast. I had lain awake till long past midnight, and then slept heavily, and now it was past nine o'clock, and everybody was down, and Gilbert and Sibyl were out on the beach already.

"Here is quite a fresh cup of coffee for you," said Gussie, complacently; "I made it myself, Margaret. And here's some potted something that Tom was sure you would like, and he kept it for you, though Sibyl wanted it, and here is an egg; mamma thought it would be good for you. And papa sent you those two peaches. And oh, Margaret, I don't know whether I am most glad or most sorry!"

"What are you glad and sorry about?"

"About you and Tom, to be sure! It is grand to think I am going to have you for my very own sister; but then, I do not believe Tom is half good enough for you. I am not near old enough to be married, and I can't tell how it feels to be in love, and all that sort of thing, but I do not think I ever could be in love with a young man like Tom. He is my brother, and I cannot help being his sister; but if I were not his sister, only his cousin, as you are, I would certainly help being his wife."

"I am going to help it, Gussie."

"Then you have changed your mind? Oh, I am glad *most*, I think; only a little sorry. But I am afraid there will be a terrible uproar."

"No, Gussie, I have not changed my mind; I have never wavered for an instant."

"I do not understand you."

"Gussie, I told Tom plainly from the very first that I would not be his wife. And the 'very first' was only last night. I could not refuse him till he asked me, and I have never encouraged him."

"No, I am sure you have not. I could always see that.

Sometimes I thought you were quite rude to him—not at all like yourself. But, Margaret, do you mean to tell me that when Tom what you call *proposed* last night, that you *refused* him?"

"I do tell you so! I refused him in the plainest language, and several times over. I would not take the engagement ring he offered me. I would not even take his arm as we walked home from the cliffs."

"How strange! He has completely misunderstood you. Why, they have been talking about it all breakfast-time."

"Who has been talking?"

"Everybody, except Gilbert Tredgold and myself. He looked solemn and stern, and I, of course, held my tongue. I did not want to be told publicly by Sib that 'little girls should be seen and not heard.' But I listened, and I could have said a good many things if I had liked."

"What was said?"

"More than I can remember; but mamma said she and you, and I also, if I were particularly good, were going up to town in a fortnight about your *trousseau*. And she and Sibyl went into the clothes question profoundly, and mamma looked at papa and said, 'Of course, my dear, you give us *carte blanche*.' And papa nodded and seemed famously pleased, and he must have been in glorious good temper, for he choked down a whole *rissole* at once, that he might say, 'You shall have a blank cheque, and fill it up for any sum you like; let everything be as it was for Nora and the twins.' Then they talked about the bridesmaids; and I am to be one,—that is, I was to be if you married Tom. Oh, Margaret, had you not better think again before you quite decide? After all, it must be famous fun to be married!"

"The fun would soon be over, Gussie, and the consequences would remain. Did Tom say anything?"

"Oh, yes; he said a great deal. And when Mr. Saunderson congratulated him on his prospects of becoming 'a Benedick,'—what *is* that, Margaret? Is it the Greek for husband, or married man? I know it's not Latin, or French, or German—he made quite a speech, and made believe that

you had fallen in love with each other three years ago—when first you came to Crofton Lawn, you know. And Sibyl joked him, and he joked back again, and talked slang, and at last Mr. Saunderson said in a very mocking tone,—only Tom—he is stupid, you know—took it all for reality,—'I shall take the first opportunity of congratulating your beautiful *fiancée*, Mr. Tom. I must confess I did not give Miss Margaret credit for so much good sense, or for so much taste! That she has chosen most happily, most charmingly, is self-apparent.' And Tom bowed, and looked silly; but I really believe that Mr. Saunderson meant that you had chosen ill and miserably, and that your taste in engaging yourself to Tom was *bad*."

"I have no doubt he did; I know his sarcastic tone. But he, and everybody, must be made to understand the truth. It is horrible that I should be talked about in this way. Gussie, if you have any opportunity—that is, if any one speaks to you about this pretended engagement, say stoutly that it is not true—say that I have told you so, that I would sooner run away and be a beggar than be Tom's wife."

"I will say it, Margaret. But do finish your breakfast. Then will you get up and come down?"

"I do not know; I cannot bear coming down after all that has been said."

"But you must come down some time, and, if it is horrible, hadn't you better face it at once, and have done with it. If I knew I had to go and meet half-a-dozen dragons I would go as quickly as I could, and have the fight out before I died of apprehensions."

"You are right, Gussie. It is of no use putting off an inevitable evil. I will get up at once, and face *mes dragons*, before all my courage evaporates. If I wait till to-morrow it will all ooze out at my fingers' ends, like Bob Acres'; and, at that rate, I may get married to Tom in spite of everything."

Gussie went away, evidently in a brown study. Presently I saw her pacing the garden walks, still deeply cogitating, and, finally, I saw her run out to meet Gilbert, and put her

arm confidentially in his, and lead him away up the hill-road, I could see from my window. For a long time I watched them, till at last they disappeared at a point where the ground took a sudden dip, and I wondered whether Gussie would say anything about the matter we had just discussed. She was very fond of Gilbert, and would have scampered off with him pretty frequently had "the powers that be" permitted it. But Sibyl was ever on the watch, and Mr. Saunderson was generally "on the prowl," as Tom phrased it, so that very rarely could Gussie secure the companionship she liked next to mine. How it happened this morning I could not guess; but I fancied Gilbert was pleased enough to roam away, out of sight and sound of the others, with his "little sweetheart," as he had once, to Sibyl's inexpressible disgust, called the child.

Afterwards I heard what had passed. Gussie waited till they were quite out of sight of the house and the shore, and then she proposed that they should plunge into a certain wood near at hand, where special ferns were said to grow, and where they would not be likely to be found out, and dragged away to go boating, or scrambling, or walking *en grande tenue* upon the Promenade. And, being at last safely ensconced among the trees, she commenced, "Do you think it is all true, Gilbert, about Margaret and Tom?"

"Of course I do. There is no manner of doubt about it. I dare say you are very glad."

"I should be if it were true, on some accounts. I should like to think Margaret was my sister, and really belonged to us for life; but I do not think Tom is nearly good enough for her, and so for that reason you know, and only for that, I am glad that it is *not* true."

"What can you mean, Gussie? You heard all that passed at breakfast-time. Besides, weeks ago your mamma told me that her dear niece was to be her daughter very speedily, and that they all approved, and that the wedding was to be before Christmas. Tom spoke of his cousin as his own peculiar property from the very first; before I had known you all many hours, he had hinted to me something about

an understanding between her and himself. You are mistaken, Gussie. I suppose they think you are too young to be taken into confidence."

"No, indeed," replied Gussie, eagerly; "I am more in Margaret's confidence than any one. She would say things to me that she would never say to anybody else; and I tell you I am not mistaken, and poor Margaret is in dreadful trouble; and, Gilbert—Mr. Tredgold,—you are her oldest friend, and I think you ought to help her. But I forget: you do not like Margaret now; you are unkind to her for the sake of that cross-patch Sibyl, who will lead you such a life, Tom says, when you are married to her. And she will too, for she has led us a life ever since I can remember; and once I was worse than Sibyl, and I should have grown up a wretch, only fit to be drowned like the cat that Sib put out of the way, if it had not been for Margaret, who is the best, and the sweetest, and the dearest girl in the world, and ten thousand times handsomer than Sib, with her yellow hair and great blue eyes. Did you ever hear about the cat?"

"Yes; it seems to be one of the current stories of Cotswoldbury. But, Gussie, if I were you, I would not refer to it. It is a tale better forgotten; and I dare say Sibyl regrets it now; and it is not nice for her little sister to talk about it. But please to understand I am not going to marry Sibyl. And now, will you explain yourself a little, and not be quite so discursive? How can I help Miss Torrington?"

"Why don't you call her Margaret?"

"Never mind that point; but just tell me one thing. You say you are in your cousin's confidence; and confidence, you must remember, is sacred. Only, I suppose I may ask you on what grounds you contradict the report of this engagement, and what kind of trouble it is that Margaret is in?"

"My grounds are that Margaret herself contradicts it with all her might. Tom never asked her downright till last night, and she at once said '*No.*' She was even rude to him, she tells me; but it was of no use. And now papa and mamma, and all of them, take it for granted, and talk

about it to everybody, and Margaret will either have to yield or to make the most horrible fuss. She said she would run away and be a beggar rather than be Tom's wife; and do you know, Gilbert, if I were a young lady, and not Tom's own sister, I think I would."

"And I am sure I would, too, if I were a young lady; for your brother has not the stuff in him out of which good husbands are made. But, Gussie, what do you think I can do in the matter?"

"In the first place, you must not believe anything they say; in the second, you must let Margaret know that you do not; in the third place, you must help to pacify papa and mamma when they find that Margaret really is in earnest; and, lastly, you must never say that I told you anything! Sib would cut my head off if she heard me now!"

"Not quite that, I hope."

Meanwhile I went downstairs, and found only Sibyl in the drawing-room; but the moment I appeared, she began to discuss the subject most distasteful to me—my alleged engagement. She told me she had written to Mrs. Druce, and that we were to stay at her house in Belgravia when we went up to town about my *trousseau;* and then she asked who I would like to have for my bridesmaids besides the three children, Eliza, Gussie, and Rosa, apologizing for not offering her own services, on the plea of having already appeared in the same capacity so often! In vain I protested that no *trousseau* was necessary; that marriage was the last thing I was anticipating; that I had never dreamed of being engaged to Tom; and that nothing on earth would tempt or force me into so detestable a union. I spoke strongly, for I felt that mildness was unavailing; but I might have spared my eloquence, such as it was, for Sibyl was more imperturbable than her mother, and to all I could say only returned smiling, half-jesting answers, rallying me on my coyness, laughing at my simplicity at not knowing my own mind, scolding me for being "missish," and finishing up with, "It is all very well, Margaret, to go to certain lengths. Of course it is the one chance a woman has of making herself

of real consequence, and I do not wonder at you for taking advantage of the opportunity. It is well that we should keep our lovers trembling, and hoping, and fearing for awhile, or what is too easily won may be too lightly prized; and I do not blame you for keeping Tom on the rack for a day or so—it will do him good, and take some of his intolerable conceit out of him; but, Margaret,"—and she lowered her voice, and spoke very gravely—"let me advise you not to go *too far!* If you make an enemy of Tom, it will be the worse for you afterwards; for it is written in the Book of Fate that you are to be his wife; and really it is a splendid match for you—such a one as you had no right to expect!"

"I never did and do not expect it. Oh, Sibyl, you will drive me mad between you. Once more I repeat it—I am in earnest—I do not love Tom, and I will not marry him; even if I were dragged to the altar, which can scarcely happen in this age and in this country, I would not say the words which should inseparably unite us."

She began to be angry then. "You had better not talk in that way—we shall not bear it. You wretched, ungrateful girl! Are you not indebted to us for home, position, education, indulgences,—everything you have or may have? Have you not been brought out as if you really were a Crofton? are you not treated as a daughter of the house—?"

I interrupted her. "Yes, Sibyl, since one day in August it has been as you say; and now I see why I am so treated. Up to that evening when we held a certain conversation in Mrs. Crofton's dressing-room, I was a mere cipher in the family—far worse, for I met often with contumely and injustice, and even the servants were encouraged to show me disrespect. I think I understand you, Sibyl: you are playing a double game; but intrigue does not always prosper."

Her temper was all in a blaze at this address, and she would probably have said some very forcible things indeed if Mrs. Crofton had not just then appeared, and, half chidingly and half soothingly, stopped the angry torrent of words that was just commencing to overflow the bounds of prudence, and carried me off to prepare for a drive, alleging that I needed fresh

air and quiet to chase away my headache and to bring some colour back to my pale cheeks.

"Who will drive us?" I inquired, timidly.

"Really, Margaret," returned Mrs. Crofton coldly, "you are extremely disagreeable. Are you determined to get up a quarrel? I desire you to go and dress, and be so good as to make haste. I have ordered the ponies round."

"Is Tom going with us?" I asked, in desperation.

"Of course he is. Now, not another word."

"Aunt, I cannot, I will not appear again in public with Tom. My doing so will confirm the report so falsely spread about of my engagement to him. I have spoken plainly to him, and he must understand me; and I will not give him any just reason to call me a flirt or a coquette."

"Upon my word, child, you will tire my patience out. Do you think Tom—*my son*—is to be sacrificed to your girlish scruples and affectation? Margaret, I tell you Tom will be a castaway if you renounce him. I am sorry that he has made this choice; but, having made it, he must not be thwarted. And, Margaret, once more I tell you it is vain to struggle, it is vain to be rebellious. You are my son's betrothed, the world knows you as such: if—mark what I say—if you persist in being refractory, people will say the match was broken off *because you were unworthy*. You will either be Tom's wife at the time appointed, or you will be thrown helpless on the world, unprotected, uncared for, and with blemished reputation."

All at once I felt strengthened to say, "Then I choose the latter alternative. But I shall not be uncared for: God, who pities the orphan and interferes for the oppressed, will be my Protector. If my character be unjustly blackened, He will make it white again in the sight of all men; He will save me from the evil machinations of my enemies. I trust in Him—*to Him I make my appeal.*"

Sibyl, who had followed us, burst out laughing. "Really, mamma, you look quite subdued at Margaret's fine piece of acting. I dare say she treated Tom to some grand tragedy last night. But if you stay talking so long you will never

get a good drive before dinner; and I see the ponies are brought round. I will go and fetch Margaret's bonnet and scarf."

I had made my protest, I had struggled as long as I could, and now I sat feeling perfectly helpless and exhausted. I was so weak and so bewildered that I believe if they had brought a clergyman and a special license at that moment I should in very despair have uttered the irrevocable "*I will!*" Sibyl came down and dressed me for the drive without an effort of my own. Mrs. Crofton poured out a glass of wine and held it to my lips till I drank it. Then came Tom, looking sad and subdued, and with a deferential—nay, a chivalrous air I had not imagined to be in him, drew my trembling arm in his, and led me to the carriage. I could resist no longer, and I went without a word: but I scarcely knew where I was; and the shining sea and the green hills swam before my eyes as I took my seat in the pretty little pony phaeton, with my cousin at my side. Mrs. Crofton at the last moment excused herself, and to my horror I found that I was to have a *tête-à-tête* with Tom.

But he had the discretion not to allude to the conversation of the previous night. He seemed really sorry that I was suffering, really miserable that I refused to smile upon him; and for the first time it dawned upon me that Tom, in his own peculiar way, really did love me, and probably *would* "go to the bad," as he phrased it, if I disappointed him. Then I began to think whether, after all, I had better not succumb. There was no one else who cared for me so much—no one else over whose future I had the least control. Even now, Tom was greatly changed for the better: might not my influence as a wife produce still greater and permanent changes? I had had my own dreams about love—what girl has not?—and they had faded away into nothingness. Would it not be better to accept my fate? At least I might do Tom good, and, perhaps, I should in time be quietly, rationally happy. And the temptation grew upon me as we drove along the pleasant Woodport-road; and Tom talked, with only a very slight admixture of slang, about various things,

in which we all were interested. He did not plead his cause again, yet in every tone and glance there was the devoted lover. We came back another way, and just as we reached a certain point where several roads converged, we came upon Gussie and Gilbert Tredgold returning from their rambles. Gilbert looked rather steadily and gravely at me; and I could see that Gussie was very much surprised.

We reached home before them, and, as Tom handed me from the carriage, he said in a low voice, that was tremulous with real anxiety, "Margaret, mayn't I hope just a little? Don't be so hard upon a fellow. Will you think it over once more?"

And I answered, "I will think it over, as you ask me so urgently, Tom; but do not imagine that I can change my mind."

Yet, as I spoke, I felt that I was wavering. It was so difficult to resist, so easy to consent—at least, in the present; and Tom perceived that I was not so stedfast as I had been, and he seemed relieved.

"When will you let me speak to you again?" he whispered, as he led me into the house.

"To-morrow evening I will tell you finally whether it can be or not."

"Thanks, thanks, dearest Margaret! Oh, we shall be happy after all!" And away he ran to report progress, doubtless, to his mother.

CHAPTER XXXII.

ANOTHER PROPOSAL.

I WAS really ill that day, and unable to think calmly. I wished not to come down to dinner, but my objections were overruled by Mrs. Crofton, for I really had not strength to dispute the question with her. Besides, she spoke authoritatively, and the old habit of obedience, prompt and unques-

tioning prevailed. To my great relief, Mr. Saunderson and Gilbert were not present. For the first time, I think, since our arrival at Cleeve-super-Mare, they dined in their own lodgings. My uncle, also, was absent, so that our party was a small one, and every one seemed inclined to be gracious, Mrs. Crofton peculiarly so. As for Tom, poor fellow, the gleam of hope I had shown him had evidently raised his spirits to the very zenith, and he devoted himself to me in a way that would have been most entertaining had it not been the demonstration of what involved so much. As it was, I wished he would be less attentive, and allow me to eat, or rather not to eat, my dinner in peace. I was too tired to talk, and yet he constrained me to keep up some kind of conversation—if fragmentary remarks, and answering at cross-purposes can be so considered. At last, I told him that my head ached, and that I was very weary, and I begged him to be silent.

He said not another word; he only selected the finest fruit, and laid it on my plate, and poured me out a glass of special claret, supposed to be highly restorative in cases of nervous headache. After a little while, Sibyl suggested that I should lie down again, but I said I would rather take a solitary walk, and if I might be permitted to go out unaccompanied I should be glad.

"Permitted indeed!" returned Tom. "I should think so! Who is to say you nay? I will take care that your wish shall be respected, Margaret. You shall wander where you will, and I promise not to cross your path; and if anybody else presumes to do so," and he looked fiercely at Sibyl, "let them look to it."

I went away thankfully, resolved on finding the road to a certain spot on the top of some distant cliffs, where I was not likely to be disturbed. Gussie and I had been there once. We had climbed the ravine from the shore, and found ourselves in a charming little amphitheatre of rocks, with one strip of fragrant thymy turf, where autumn flowers still lingered in rare beauty. And I could get to it easily

from the higher lands, for I had noted the path among the thickets that led to this quiet nook.

The bright morning had faded into a dull grey afternoon, the breeze had dropped, scarcely a leaf was stirred, and the heavy air was sultry. Nevertheless, as I lost sight of Mendip House, I felt as if I had suddenly recovered freedom and the power of unfettered thought. No, I would sit down and think over my position, and make up my mind as to the final answer I should give to Tom. As for those foolish dreams of mine, the sooner they were out of my head the better. My cheeks glowed with wounded pride as I thought how utterly vain and unfounded had been the hopes I entertained. Not only was I regarded with indifference by the one friend whom in all the world I would fain have love me dearly, but I had reason to believe that I was positively disliked by him, probably despised. And could I wonder? He had been made to understand that I had consented to be Tom's wife, and he must have known that, if it were so, true affection could have no place in the covenant I had made. He must look upon me as upon a woman false to the holiest instincts of her nature—false to early training, and to all sweet memories of the past; as upon a woman who would deliberately barter herself for a name and for position. No wonder that he almost hated me. But then, in what state were his own affairs? Was it possible that he could love Sibyl? or was he dazzled only by her beauty and her extraordinary powers of fascination?

Could I ever be happy as Tom's wife? My heart deliberately said "No." Had there been no such person as Gilbert Tredgold in the world—had those bygone days on the lonely shore of St. Eldred's never been, still Tom could never have been to me that which he ought to be if I took him for my husband. I did not know then, as I knew afterwards, how utterly unprincipled he was; how recklessly he had sinned, even as the world counts sinning: how unscrupulously, how selfishly, he had sacrificed everything and everybody to his own wayward, lawless pleasures! His mother knew it, and his father too well; and it was not,

perhaps, to be greatly wondered at that they should seize thus eagerly upon the only apparent remedy that had yet presented itself for their son's unsteadiness.

But how much reliance might I place on the promises so largely given? Could I believe in the reformation wrought by such ignoble means? Had I the slightest reason to hope that such amendment could be more than temporary? I could not believe it, and I did not hope it; for I knew perfectly that the change in Tom's life arose, not from repentance, or from conviction, but merely from satiety, as regarded the past, and the pursuit of a new object, as concerned the present.

But what would become of me, if I dismissed my cousin's suit! I could not possibly remain an inmate of my uncle's house, and I could not hope any longer for the countenance or protection of his wife. Well! that was only what I was anticipating when Gilbert Tredgold came, and changed all "the spirit of my dream." Had I not resolved to go forth and battle with the world, to earn my own bread, to be my own protector, to stand on my own feet, unaided, and, if need were, unbefriended—a solitary, independent, free, hard-working woman? Ah! but that was when the irksomeness of my situation had become intolerable—when the monotony of my life, broken only by unkindness, had seemed unendurable. Now I had tasted of the pleasures which wealth and position give; now I had learned to estimate the value of certain advantages despised before; and now the prospect of living a lonely life of toil, of self-denial, and, possibly, of hardship, did not seem so inviting or so glorious as once it seemed. Surely I was not one to bear luxury; for already I was enervated, already I had learned to bask in the sunshine, and to shrink pitifully from the cold.

And yet anything was better than the loveless union I had thought possible an hour ago. From an unsuitable marriage there was no escape, no appeal; and circumstances might arise in which it would be harder to do one's duty than to starve, or to earn one's daily food by painful, lowly labour of the hands.

"Yes," I said to myself, after long musing; "I see clearly now it must not be. To poverty, to misery, even, a brighter day may come; long sickness may give place to renewed health; new friends may soothe the sense of loss, though they may not quite fill the blanks that death and change will make; the troubles that arise from want of money, money may scatter any day;—but for such a marriage as mine would be there is no remedy." But again the wretched alternative presented itself, and again I shrank back appalled, as I thought of the drear, wide world before me; and I cried in anguish of spirit, "What shall I do? Oh! what shall I do?"

Far off, on the wide grey waters, was a solitary sail—it was a little boat, going, as it seemed to me, against the current, but slowly making way. And back on my mind rushed all that Gilbert had said long before about the voyage of life, and how I had wished to be out of my pleasant land-locked bay, breasting the waves for myself, and smiling at the thought of adverse winds and tides. Now I was, indeed, among the breakers, and, unless some help came, I must surely be wrecked and lost.

One who knew well the human heart wrote—

> "In sooth, we feel too strong in weal, to need *Thee* on the road;
> But, woe being come, the soul is dumb that calleth not on God."

And now—wherefore I knew not—I suppose it was the natural instinct of a sinking soul that turns to God, when, all unaided, the waves are closing about it, that made me cry out, "O my God, guide me, keep me, from the evil! I am quite alone in the world: I have no friend but Thee. Be my Counsellor, my Father. If it be possible, open a way of escape."

I am not sure that such were my exact words, but I am quite sure that such were my supplications, either spoken or unuttered; and I sat a long time, with my face on my knees, in a sort of agony, that was really prayer, though then I should not have called it so. But when once more I raised my head, I was quite resolved. By God's help I

would put from me the temptation which had assailed me—the temptation to purchase a present seeming good at the price of a certain future misery—perhaps at the price of my own soul, but surely at the price of my own self-respect! And if a woman once loses self-respect, down what dark gulfs may she not drift, as helplessly she steers her feeble bark among the shallows and the shoals of this world's deceitful sea!

As I gazed sadly, but more hopefully, across the Channel, the sun broke suddenly through a bank of heavy clouds, and cast on the sullen heaving waves a line of glittering light, that seemed like a shining track, leading straightway to the land of rest, and presently there came a broad space of blue where only a few minutes before there had been dense, unbroken gloom; and something seemed to say to my heart, "Be of good cheer. All will yet be well."

But as the clouds broke more and more, and as the sun shone out broad and red upon the horizon, I saw that he would soon be dipping behind the purple hills on the other side the Channel, and that I must think of retracing my steps. I had been nervous of being out in the dusk ever since my encounter with young Clavering and his companions at Cotswoldbury. I was about to rise from my rocky seat when I heard the falling of stones in the steep path below, and the rustling of bushes almost at my feet. It was a very lonely place, and I felt afraid, for my nerves were altogether shaken; and absurd fancies about smugglers and pirates darted through my harassed brain. I rose, however, and stood still, for to escape the intruder, whoever he might be, was impossible.

It was a familiar face, however, that lifted itself the next instant above the edge of the cliff,—a face that relieved me of every foolish apprehension, and yet filled me with dismay. How I wished I had left the place a quarter of an hour ago. But the frank smile and the cheery voice soon dissipated my incertitude. My friend was looking bright and genial, as he had looked that afternoon when he clasped my hand in Upping's shop,—as he had never looked since the first few

days of our renewed intercourse. It was the old Gilbert Tredgold; it was the dear companion of my childhood who greeted me now, and asked me if I were not tired of watching the sea and sky from that one point of view.

"I have not been here long," I replied. And, indeed, it seemed to me as if but a few minutes had elapsed since I came down the tiny sheep-track that led to this sequestered hollow.

"You have been here almost two hours," was Gilbert's rejoinder. "I saw you scramble down, and I watched for you to reascend; but, finding you still stationary, and the light waning so fast, I thought it better even to run the risk of startling you. I hope I did not frighten you much?"

"Oh, no! I was only a little afraid, and that but for a moment!"

"But you are looking very pale, Margaret."

"I am not well. I came out for a solitary ramble, in the hope of curing a distracting headache."

"Yes. Gussie told me that you were gone out alone, and the why and the wherefore; and for certain reasons I had, I presumed to follow you. Also, Gussie told me what I wish —if I may ask so much—to hear confirmed from your own lips. She told me that there is no truth in this report,—this assertion, I should say,—of your engagement to your Cousin Tom?"

"There is no truth in it!"

"Thank God for that! How could I be so blinded? But, Margaret, Tom Crofton told me, from the very first, that you and he understood each other; that you had been attached for some months, only you had not till very lately obtained the parental sanction. I never thought a man would lie so utterly. Besides, Mrs. Crofton gave me a very similar view of the case when one evening we were speaking of you. She told me, distinctly, that the marriage was all but finally arranged; that she had disapproved very much at first; but that she could not bear to stand in the way of the happiness of two young creatures, whose lives seemed bound up in one; and a great deal more she said that is not worth

repeating. There is, then, Margaret, no engagement—no attachment—on your side?"

"Not the slightest; I shrink with terror from such a marriage. But to-day, nearly borne down with threats, persuasions, and a power with which it seemed as if it were vain to cope, I began to think I must yield. But while I sat here, I decided that, come what might, I would be steadfast,—I would still persist in refusing to become the wife of a man whom not only I must fail to love, but to respect!"

"You are quite certain, Margaret, that you never will repent of this decision?"

"Quite! Come what may, I shall be *free!* I shall not hate and despise myself for having made a marriage of expediency. My uncle, and Mrs. Crofton, and I dare say Tom himself, some day will be glad that I would not succumb to influences."

"Margaret! I am not sure that I have a right to ask you; but it seems to me that you need some protection now. I did hope, before Tom told me this made-up story of your mutual attachment, that in time I might win you for myself. Of course when he—evidently with intention—told me the alleged state of things, I could only strive to banish from my mind all such aspirations. Honour forbade me to think of you, save as my early friend and playmate; but I am afraid I did think notwithstanding!"

"It appeared to me that you thought of Sibyl!"

"I have been imprudent, Margaret,—I see it now; little Gussie opened my eyes;—but I declare to you that I thought Sibyl Crofton was bent, not on uniting herself to *me*, but on supplanting me."

"I really do not understand."

"I thought—and, indeed, I half think it still—Sibyl wishes to make a conquest of Mr. Saunderson."

"Gilbert! what a monstrous idea! Why, he is as old—nay, older than her father!"

"Where a million of money is concerned, age, infirmities, and temper are too often ignored."

"Still I believe it is you, not Mr. Saunderson, for whom Sibyl cares, and I had quite convinced myself that you were devoted to her."

"Margaret, nothing would tempt me to marry Sibyl Crofton. By Mr. Saunderson's express desire, I accompanied them in all their expeditions, and somehow it seemed *arranged* that in any division of our party Sibyl should fall to my share. But I should infinitely have preferred Gussie! Sibyl is a very beautiful woman, I suppose; but then she is worldly, insincere, and uncertain in her temper; besides, she is so old!"

"Not so very old! she is in her twenty-fourth year."

"I fancied she had been thirty; she looks quite elderly when she is not pleased."

"She wears badly, I suppose. Now, Mrs. Druce is as charming as ever."

"Never mind Mrs. Druce—never mind Sibyl; but just tell me, Margaret, if I may take to myself the right of protecting you, so far as I can,—if I may think of you as the companion of all my future life?"

I need not recount my answer, nor all that passed after we had agreed that we loved each other; and that Sibyl and Tom, and all other people about us, were but as shadows in the beautiful new world into which we had just entered. And we sat there in the little rocky hollow, forgetful of the falling shades of evening, heeding not the chill breeze that was sweeping up the coast, now that the sun had set and the sultry gloom had passed away. We might have lingered there till the stars were shining, if the sound of a distant church clock had not faintly reached us, and reminded us that we must conform ourselves to the ordinary proprieties of life, and go home to tea. Our hour of romance was over; the bright fairy-land, on whose borders we had been standing, suddenly receded. We had to come back to the actual, to the present; and the return was not agreeable. And still that hour stands out in memory—bright, vivid, blissful. Still, as I look back from the sober sense of middle age to the untried experiences of early womanhood,

that twilight hour in the hollow of the cliff shines upon me fair as ever—a beautiful green oasis in the arid desert that stretches behind it and before it.

As we walked home—oh, how different from last evening's walk!—we began to discuss our plans. How were we to proceed? Where should I betake myself? For that I should remain a member of the Crofton family was obviously, for reasons plural, impossible. And, finally, what would Mr. Saunderson say to his *protegé* for presuming to choose for himself?

To the final proposition Gilbert replied, gravely enough, that he was afraid he would be *furious*. And, I remembering certain previous symptoms of personal disfavour and disapprobation, entertained the same fears. I was quite certain that Mr. Saunderson would never regard me as his adopted daughter, however thoroughly he might recognize Gilbert as his adopted son.

"I hastened to say, "Gilbert, I would not for the world interfere with your prospects—anything but that."

"A true and honourable attachment such as ours, Margaret, can never really mar my prospects in life. It seemed at first so grand a thing to be taken up by a wealthy man like my patron, but——"

"But what?"

"But I am afraid I am not cut out for patronage; yet I would not be ungrateful. Still, I should like to strive and struggle for myself. I am by no means sure that a ready-made fortune is good for me. You see I was brought up to work hard, Margaret; and though I have toiled manfully at my studies, there has not seemed in books and languages scope for my strong energies; besides, I yearn after the sea —I long to undertake a voyage."

"Would not Mr. Saunderson permit you to go a single voyage?"

"It is Mr. Saunderson's will that I should be constantly with him. He expects my attendance everywhere and at all times. It was with difficulty I eluded him to-day. Ah, Margaret, I am very proud, I fear; but this dependence is

hateful to me. Sometimes I envy the common sailors, and the veriest scarecrows of pilots. If it were not for my parents! Ah, Margaret, I have just thought of it: you shall go to them; my mother will take you to her arms at once, and with Alice and Bertha you will be an honoured guest. You shall go to them till I can claim you."

"We will think more about it; and, Gilbert, what shall I say to Mrs. Crofton and Tom?"

"Simply answer Tom's suit in the negative. Leave all the rest of the saying to me. I shall speak to Mr. Saunderson as soon as we are alone to-night; and here we are at Mendip House."

"May we venture to go in together?"

"Certainly; we have nothing to hide. I am proud of my afternoon's work, Margaret. Let them think what they like; they will soon know all."

But, in spite of Gilbert's cheery words and the pressure of his strong arm, I trembled in every limb as we entered the porch, and beheld Tom glowering upon us from the background of the lighted hall. Certainly I had reached the crisis of my fate! Nevertheless, though I shook with apprehension, I was wonderfully happy,—happier than I had ever been in all my life before!

CHAPTER XXXIII.

SENT TO COVENTRY.

Not heeding Tom's ungracious demeanour, I went straight to my own room, and shut myself in with my new-born happiness, feeling as if I must contemplate it all alone before I ventured to own to its possession in the presence of any second person. Alas! I had no mother to go to, no father to consult; the ears that would have listened so tenderly, and with such deep interest to the tale I had to tell, had long since been closed in the silence of the grave. Brothers and sisters I had none, and friends were so few that I could count them on the fingers of one hand, and those few were far away.

But for the moment I forgot that in kindred ties I was poorer than most girls. I forgot the apprehensions and misgivings that had thronged upon me, as I walked home in the gathering darkness—apprehensions that I was certain Gilbert shared. I thought not of to-morrow and the storm of censure and upbraiding it might bring with it. I could only think of my deep, full happiness in being the beloved of Gilbert Tredgold, of the words he had spoken, of the bright anticipations that were *one day* to be fulfilled, of the joy of looking to him as my protector and my nearest friend, of the perfect trust I could repose in him, and of the full content that made me smile as if in serene pity of my old self when I remembered the miserable perplexities of a few hours ago. There was no temptation now to yield the contested point: Gilbert did *not* care for Sybil, and he *did* care for me—his own lips had told me so; and Tom Crofton, with the wealth of a millionaire and the prospect of a coronet, would have sunk into utter nothingness compared with Gilbert, even if he went back to his lowly estate of fisherman.

I suppose it was very silly and romantic of me; but, then, girls in their nineteenth year will be romantic, though the hard world and the stern realities of life cure them quickly enough of what people ungently call "their folly." Ah! let the folly have its way for a little while; let the sweet dreams linger; let the young heart beat impulsively as it gazes on the dazzling fairy-land in the beauteous distance. It is but for a while, and changes are at hand to chase away the golden dreams, and to still the impatient heart, and to turn the gleaming bowers of Paradise into the sober, earnest land of real life.

And, foolishly and romantically, I dare say, I sat with my hands folded, smiling to myself at the picture of a quiet cottage home somewhere by the sea; a home in its humble but yet elegant appointments, something like the Palace of Content. I could see its white walls, mantled, of course, with ivy and flowering creeping plants, especially with "red, red roses," such as used to glow to the intensest and most

burning crimson in the level rays of the July setting sun, about the old-fashioned casements of Kelver House. I could see its blooming garden, with trim borders, well-kept turf, and a retired plot for vegetables and herbs, and plenty of fruit-trees everywhere. I could see its pleasant parlour, simply furnished indeed, but not lacking any of our favourite books, or a rosewood pianoforte. I could even see its cozy kitchen, where one little maid did as she was bid always, and sang merry ditties about sailor boys and "the blue, blue sea," as she went about her work. And I could see myself, the most managing, the thriftiest, and the happiest young matron in the world, and the master coming in, when his day's toil was over, tired perhaps, but brimming over with a quiet content as he neared the ivy-clad and rose-wreathed cottage, where he knew he would be waited upon, and talked to, and read to, and sung to, and generally petted, according to his moods. Yes, I could see all this; but between me and this lovely fairy-land lay a troubled sea which I must cross as best I might. Would the dream ever become true? Would that happy home, thus pictured in my fancy, *ever* become a reality? Would God *thus* bring me "unto the haven where I would be?"

I was roused by hearing some one on the staircase proclaim that tea was waiting.

I had to withdraw my gaze from that placid, moonlit sea, and my thoughts from the channel into which they had wandered; and Gussie ran into the room, and, linking her arm in mine, descended with me to the parlour, where all the family save little Rosa were gathered.

Sibyl, as usual, sat behind the urn, and she was looking as I had not seen her look for many a day: there was not the ghost of a smile upon her face, she seemed restless and annoyed, and the old worn, haggard expression had suddenly come back. Well might Gilbert take her for thirty; she looked that evening scarcely younger than her mother, and not half so handsome; for Mrs. Crofton was, on the whole, well preserved, while her daughter was a faded beauty, the mere wreck of her former self.

Tom sat silently munching bread and butter and crumpets, and drinking countless cups of tea—my rejection of his suit had not impaired his appetite, though something had evidently spoiled his temper; Mrs. Crofton looked grave and irritable; Mr. Saunderson was *glum*—I can find no better word; my uncle seemed pre-occupied and weary; and Gilbert certainly was ill at ease. Gussie was the only one at table upon whom no cloud rested; but her quick perceptions soon informed her of the highly electrical state of our social atmosphere.

The constraint was painful—at least, I found it so, though we made a show of being in our ordinary spirits; and some kind of conversation was carried on, and everybody except Sibyl, who appeared to be seriously exasperated with the sugar-tongs, made disjointed remarks now and then touching the evening, the neighbourhood, and the people who had been out on the Promenade that afternoon.

We had no music that evening, and it was a relief when Mr. Saunderson and Gilbert rose up to go to their own lodgings at least an hour before the usual time. When we were alone Sibyl asked me sneeringly if I had quite recovered from my headache. I said that I still felt a little heaviness, and, being very tired, I thought I would follow Gussie to bed.

"What made you go walking with that fellow?" asked Tom, with a sudden blurt, just as I was gathering up my work-basket and preparing to say good night.

"I went walking with no one, Tom," I replied as quietly as I could. "If by 'that fellow' you mean Mr. Tredgold, he found me on the cliff, and, as a matter of course, came home with me."

"Is that all?" he asked, savagely. "Are you sure that is all?"

I coloured furiously, and my eyes sought the ground. Was it thus in full conclave that I must confess the truth?

"You can ask Mr. Tredgold yourself to-morrow," Tom, I answered, trying to speak calmly, and with a certain

dignity; "I do not see what right you have to question me."

"Right, indeed?" exclaimed Sibyl. "The same right as if he were your husband. An engaged girl ought to be as particular as a married woman?"

Which exordium came from Sibyl about as gracefully as a sermon against pride would have proceeded from Lucifer. Miss Crofton had been engaged more than once, but her little affairs had always "gone off," as we say, in every instance save one—the episode of the drowned cat—because of her flirting propensities, which seemed to impel her to keep no one knew how many strings to her bow.

"But I am not an engaged girl," I returned hastily, my resentment getting the better of my prudence;—"that is, I am not, and I never shall be, engaged to Tom."

"You've let the cat out of the bag," replied Tom, sullenly. 'I knew by the fellow's look as he came in smirking at the door, that he had been doing something dishonourable—I felt sure he had been making love to you—talking religion, and sentiment, and *stuff*, and of course making a regular fool of you! I won't have him stealing marches upon me, sneaking out and dodging people who are only too happy to be dodged. He shall not go poaching on my preserves with impunity. Why, if he doesn't take care, the foolish stripling, I'll shoot him down as I would a rabid dog, or fling him over the cliff, or give him a dose of ratsbane in his cup of coffee! If you have the slightest regard for Mr. Gilbert Tredgold, Margaret, you will give him a wide berth."

"How dare you talk so, Tom? If this is the way you do your courting, you must not wonder if you remain unmarried all your life. No girl in her senses would unite her fate with that of a man who talks like a murderer, and looks like a candidate for the hulks!"

"Bother courting! I've done the agreeable long enough, and with no result. Will you be my wife or will you not?"

"That question was to be settled to-morrow evening: you promised not to speak again till then."

"I did not know this morning that you would play me false, and play Sibyl false too. Upon my word, Margaret, you are turning out a regular snake in the grass."

"What has Sibyl to do with it?"

She turned upon me instantly, her face pale to lividness, and an awful concentrated passion in her eyes. She must have looked so when she plunged her feline victim in the water. I shuddered, and wished in vain that I had been more reticent.

"You know I have to do with it," she said, in those deliberate, half-whispered tones we all shrank from hearing;—"you know it is all arranged. You know that Mr. Saunderson gives consent,—that papa counts upon it! Has Gilbert Tredgold ever sought *you* till to-day? Has he not always been with me? Has he not constantly and openly preferred my society to yours? And must I not conclude that you have been seeking to entrap him? Oh, you wicked, ungrateful, deceitful, shameless girl? But I always told mamma how it would be! I saw through you, and took your measure, when you sat sipping your coffee with that insolent air you have the very first morning you were in the house."

And, having worked herself up to an uncontrollable pitch, she went off into hysterics; and water, and sal volatile, and essences were called for, and the servants appeared upon the scene, and, as my presence certainly increased the agitation of the patient, I was very glad to slip away and take refuge in my chamber. I sank down exhausted when the door was locked, and indulged in the feminine luxury of a hearty cry, and I sobbed so bitterly that Gussie was awakened, and got out of bed to see if she could comfort me.

I could not tell her what had passed,—already I was punished for not leaving "all the saying" to Gilbert; but I longed to confide in the child, who would have given me the sympathy of a woman and of a faithful friend. I think she divined something, for when she had persuaded me to undress, and I was lying by her side, she said, "Margaret, if I were you, I would not care for Sibyl or for Tom. Gilbert will make it all right for you. Oh, is he not good?"

"Yes, very good," I heartily responded, holding the child tighter in my arms.

"And, Margaret, I mean to be good now. We had a talk this morning in the wood. First of all, we talked about you; and I told him that it was all nonsense about your marrying Tom, and he said he did not care for Sibyl,—at least, not *in that way*, you know; and then we talked about the end of life."

"What do you mean?"

"He said our lives were like the rivers, that trickle down at first among the hills, and then grow deeper and broader as they run through fields and pass by towns, till at last they find their way into the great sea, and are lost to sight. So, he said, we were going on—on always *onwards*, till we came to the wide ocean of eternity; and he asked what I thought eternity would be like, and I said I supposed it would be *heaven*; and then he asked me if I were going there, and I said I didn't know; and then he said—oh! he said a lot of things, Margaret, and I made up my mind that I would be good."

"I think you are very good now, Gussie."

"I am good to you, Margaret, because I love you; and I am better than I used to be to others, because I am ashamed of my old ways. But that is not the right sort of goodness."

"Not the goodness that will take you to heaven, you mean?"

"No goodness of any sort will *take me* to heaven, Margaret. I am rather in a puzzle yet; I must talk to Gilbert again. I think I understand in myself how it is, but I could not tell it to any one. But it is just the same as Mr. and Mrs. North always say. And—oh! hadn't you better go to sleep? You will have a headache again to-morrow."

It would be well for me, I thought, if my headache were not supplemented by a heartache on the morrow; for the more I thought about the fairy-land I had pictured before tea, the more indistinct it grew, and the dimmer and the

feebler became the hopes I had so sweetly entertained. I kissed Gussie, and we exchanged "Good nights," and in a minute afterwards I knew by her quiet breathing that she was sound asleep. Happy child! to have no cares, no perplexities, no apprehensions to banish sweet repose. How long ago it seemed since I had slumbered as placidly, knowing only the bright dreams of childhood!

I lay awake long after all the house was still. I heard Tom go shuffling along in his slippers to his room, I heard other footsteps on the landing, I heard doors open and shut, and then all was silent; only the rising wind moaned without, and mingled its low, plaintive music with the monotonous murmur of the waves. I was too excited to sleep, and tossed about wearily till the grey dawn stole in, telling me that the day which must decide my fate had commenced already. I slept at last the heavy sleep of utter weariness and pain of mind, and when I awoke the sun was shining brightly on the dancing waters of the Channel. Gussie was up and gone, and the house was all astir. At first I thought I would lie still, and wait for some one to pay me a visit; but a little reflection convinced me that nothing was to be gained by putting off the evil day. It would be far better to rise at once, and face with courage all that lay before me; and now that I knew that Gilbert loved me,—and I had *such* reliance on his love, I knew it would never change,—and now that we understood each other clearly, and belonged to one another, I had every reason to be brave.

My sleep, though not of the most refreshing kind, had done me good; I was young and healthy, and not easily beaten down, either physically or mentally; the bright morning inspirited me, and the cold water dashed upon my cheeks and temples seemed to brace not only nerves, but mind. By the time I had completed my toilet, I was ready to face the world, to meet *mes dragons* with a tolerably steady countenance.

Breakfast was nearly over, and I half expected to be scolded for my tardiness; but, save a sulky nod from Tom and an exclamation from Gussie, no one took any notice of

my entrance. Sibyl filled my coffee-cup as if the act caused her extreme disgust, and pushed it towards me without a word or glance. Tom helped me to frizzled bacon with an air of magnanimity that in other circumstances would have been excessively diverting; and so I ate and drank in solemn silence, conscious all the while that I was being arraigned as a culprit upon whom sentence was ready to be pronounced, and who would not be recommended to mercy. It was not a very hearty meal that I made: it was all one to me that morning whether I luxuriated in Strasbourg *pâté* or broke my fast on school-girls' bread and butter,—all I tasted was flavourless and difficult to swallow. Being summarily "sent to Coventry" in no wise improves your appetite.

The wretched breakfast being over, I was wondering what I should do with myself and when I should hear from Gilbert, and I was just resolving to go back to my own room and wait the issue of events there, when the door opened and the footman entered with a small letter on an immense silver salver, which he handed to me with all due ceremony. All eyes were watching me, I knew, though I did not raise mine, as I broke the seal and contemplated with much misgiving the square, cramped caligraphy of the address. The very sight of the "*Miss Torrington*" was calculated to inspire one with dread and shrinking; and if the outside were thus alarming, what might not the *billet* itself contain! It was short enough and to the purpose:—

"Mr. Saunderson wishes to converse privately with Miss Torrington. He will be at Mendip House by eleven o'clock: Miss Torrington will then be good enough to grant him an interview."

I handed the brief epistle to Mrs. Crofton, who smiled as she read it, and then, looking at Sibyl as she spoke, she remarked that Mr. Saunderson should be shown into the little parlour, and that I could go to him there. Sibyl, for the first time, looked me in the face, hoping I should enjoy the interview. "Perhaps, dear," she said as she left the room, "the old gentleman is going to propose. A fresh lover and an offer daily is no more than some people's merits deserve.

I would advise you to accept him at once, and throw Mr. Tredgold over without scruple. You know the old proverb, 'A bird in the hand,' &c. Profit by its wisdom, Miss Torrington."

Sibyl's taunt did not hurt me. Ah! I knew well enough why and wherefore Mr. Saunderson desired to "converse privately" with me; he was going to do his best to separate at once and for ever Gilbert and myself. *Would he succeed?*

CHAPTER XXXIV.

THE ALTERNATIVE.

WITH what trepidation I waited for that interview may be better imagined than described. I was left alone, and I paced the room restlessly, unable to settle myself to any occupation and even to any definite line of thought. Even now I can recall how the sun was shining on the waters of the Channel, how the white-winged vessels were gliding down the current with the tide and a favourable breeze, and how the shore looked bright and pleasant, with the waves breaking on it with a thunderous sound, and the spray dashing high over rock and shingle like rich showers of pearls and brilliants in the sparkling autumn sunshine. But I heeded nothing then; my heart was beating too tumultuously to let me pause and think about the outer world. I could only move about, watching the clock upon the mantel-piece, and wondering stupidly what I should say to Mr. Saunderson, and what he first would say to me. I was gradually getting into a fever and losing all the sense I had, when a light step crossed the lawn, a face looked in at the open window, and Gilbert stood before me.

"Just one word, Margaret," he said—"*Be firm.* Never mind what Mr. Saunderson says. He will be here directly. Do not be frightened, love, if you can help it; he is always worse if he sees that any one is afraid of him. I wanted to come with him, but he insists on seeing you alone. Courage, darling! Be firm, and it will soon be over; the

storm will be pretty fierce, I have no doubt; but it will not last, you know."

"How must I be firm, Gilbert?"

"By holding to your promise to me. You have neither father nor mother; and surely I have the first right now. Say as little as you can help, but steadily decline to give me up."

Gilbert did not stay; for the hands of the timepiece were on the stroke of eleven, and we knew that the old gentleman would be punctual, and we felt instinctively that it would not mend matters if he came and found us alone together. And scarcely had I listened to the last of Gilbert's retreating footsteps, before I heard the heavy tread, and the grampus-like breathing, of my visitor; he was coming slowly up the gravel walk, and the expression of his countenance was anything but reassuring. I had never seen him look so grim, and fierce, and resolute. He vouchsafed no answer to my timid greeting,—he did not even honour me with a glance; but he deliberately closed the door, deposited his gold-headed cane in a certain corner,—that cane had its special corner wherever its owner might be; then, seating himself in the one arm-chair the room afforded, he coughed and blew his nose vociferously, and addressed himself to the encounter. I, for my part, felt my spirits rise; his rudeness nettled me, and I was determined that he should see that I was *not* afraid. So I drew my chair tolerably near to his; for, to add to his attractions, he was a little deaf,—*very* deaf when it pleased him so to be; and I had no desire to make our conversation actually public. To his great astonishment I opened the campaign by saying, very leisurely,—

"You wished to see me, Mr. Saunderson. I am quite ready to listen to anything you may have to say."

He fixed his large, grey eyes on me, half in anger, half in consternation at my temerity, and, in a severe tone, replied, "Doubtless you are prepared, Miss Torrington, for what I have to say?"

I intimated that I was not prepared, as I could not possibly know how he wished to address me.

"I do not believe you," he answered curtly; "you know well enough why I am here. You know, also, what kind of opinion I am about to express. Now, young lady, beating about the bush never did for me: I say what I mean and mean what I say; and I must request that you will not prevaricate, or put me to the trouble of asking unnecessary questions. In the first place, let me remark that Gilbert Tredgold has played the fool."

I could only say that I was sorry to hear it, or something quite as silly: the great, staring, grey eyes, and the purple nose so near my own, were fast reducing me to a state of idiocy.

Mr. Saunderson resumed: "Last night, Gilbert told me what he had said to you, and what you had said to him,—at least, he told me all that it concerned me to know; he said that he had proposed to you, and that you had accepted him, and he asked my sanction to the '*engagement*,' as he prematurely called it."

"And you disapprove of the engagement, Mr. Saunderson?"

"I should, if such a thing existed; but you are engaged to your cousin, young Crofton, and ought to be ashamed of flirtations such as you carried on with Gilbert Tredgold yesterday. I just told my young man that nothing of the kind could be permitted. I had other views for him; and I have given notice to my landlady to quit our lodgings; for to-day we quit Cleeve-super-Mare. When we are gone, perhaps you will return to your allegiance,—if, indeed, Mr. Crofton will have you after your naughty, heartless conduct."

"Understand once for all, Mr. Saunderson, that I am not, and never was, engaged to my cousin Tom." And then, feeling quite equal to the occasion, I spoke out plainly, and I told him all the story from the beginning, and how, from the very first, I had discouraged my unwelcome suitor, who had persisted in forcing himself upon me in the most ungentlemanly way; and how my want of esteem, as well as lack of anything like true affection, would

effectually deter me from becoming his wife, and equally, of course, his betrothed.

Mr. Saunderson fixed his eyes on me more keenly than before. "Am I, then, to understand," he inquired, "that you in no wise return your cousin's affection,—that you entertain for him only the merest cousinly regard?"

"I scarcely feel so much as kindly regard for him now," I answered: "he has comported himself so savagely! Had no such person as Gilbert Tredgold existed, I should have felt the same. Besides, I feel no confidence in him; and surely, Mr. Saunderson, you would not recommend any young woman to marry a man whom she could not trust."

"Pooh! pooh!" All young men will have their fling now-a-days. It was different when I was young; but the world has turned topsy-turvy since then, I believe. Tom Crofton has sown his share of wild oats, I'll be bound. What then, Miss Torrington, if they are sown and done with? Bless me! if all the men who have been unsteady in their youth had to remain wifeless as a punishment for their misdeeds, there would be five hundred bachelors to one married man. If that is all you have to urge against Mr. Crofton, junior, who seems quite inclined to settle down now and be a comfort to his parents and an honour to society, I must say you are a very foolish girl. But I suppose your head is turned with reading poetry and romances."

"Is it necessary that there should be a period of unsteadiness, as you call it, Mr. Saunderson? I must confess, I should like to marry a man who had never sown such a crop of wild oats as my cousin has; for, even if he sow no more, which I greatly doubt, we may be pretty sure that some, if not all, of those already committed to the soil, will spring up and bear fruit abundantly, and the fruit will be anything but pleasant."

"It is of no use arguing with you," returned my antagonist, testily. "Miss Sibyl told me how obstinate you were, and I find you were not at all belied. We will let this particular subject of conversation drop; and, indeed

when I was a youth, young ladies would have been ashamed to discuss the peccadilloes of their lovers. They were content with the present and the promise of the future, and they let the past go. But there is still another point of view. Do you love my adopted son, Miss Torrington?"

I felt inclined angrily to dispute his right of questioning me thus; but I ruled my temper, which was rising fast, only replying with some stateliness, "Surely, Mr. Saunderson, or I should never have engaged myself to him."

"You are not engaged to him, I tell you!" he roared, startling me so that I pushed back my chair several inches. I made no answer, thinking the fewer words I spoke the better; only, as Gilbert had instructed me, there must be no compromise in the few I uttered.

"Now, listen to me," said Mr. Saunderson presently, changing his tone to perfect calmness, and assuming an air of candour. Let us be quite open with each other—"

"I have no desire to be uncandid," I interposed. "I wish you, as Gilbert's friend and guardian, to know the truth exactly. I hate disingenuousness; I hate mysteries and falsehood."

"So far good; we shall come the more speedily to an understanding. You are a sensible girl, as I always said you were, only wilful and obstinate in the last degree. Now if, as you say, you *love* Gilbert Tredgold, you may *prove* the strength and unselfishness of your affection. Your marriage with him, your so-called engagement, persisted in, will be his ruin. You know his history, you know the particulars of his early life better than I do myself; you know how helpless are his parents, how dependent on him for all the comforts they enjoy. At present the old people are happy and prosperous—they have all, and more than all, they need: think where they would be if my countenance, if my allowance to their son, were withdrawn! What would become of the invalid sister? what of the other girl who is being educated at my expense?"

"Gilbert would work for them," I faltered, "and I would work too! But do you really mean, Mr. Saunderson,

that if—if Gilbert and I refused to give each other up, you would testify your displeasure by withdrawing your support from the old people as well as from Gilbert?"

"I do really mean it: I have marked out Gilbert's career; and he follows that career or I have done with him and *his!* Now, Miss Torrington, you will perceive the cruel mischief you will do: you have Gilbert Tredgold's fate in your hands, and you may ruin him, if you like! Regard him now,—heir to a fine estate, taking as the years go on almost any position he chooses, already habituated to all the elegancies and refinements of the upper classes, unused for more than five years,—and those years the precise period when the character is forming, and the habits and inclinations are becoming fixed—unused to toil of any kind! He would never be happy *now* as a mere labourer, or working tradesman; the life of a shopman or of an office clerk would never suit his health—it has always drooped whenever he has been too sedentary—and when he has applied himself too closely to his studies. His neglected education and the want of means would disqualify him for entering on any profession. What, then, would become of him? It might be all very pleasant at first; but as time went on, and he found himself forced back again into his old position—to say nothing of the way in which his parents must suffer—do you not think he might in his heart reproach you as the author of his misfortunes? And you, would you not reproach yourself, perceiving how you had blighted his prospects, and injured all belonging to him? Besides, question it as you will, there is much truth in the old adage about love flying out of the window when poverty comes in at the door! White cottages covered with roses are all very pretty in landscapes and in story-books, but I doubt very much whether those who admire them most would like to live in them!"

Alas! for my fairy vision. Alas! for my pleasant seaside home. It had been growing more and more remote, more shadowy, more unreal, till now, as Mr. Saunderson spoke, it vanished altogether; and I felt that one might build

cottages in the air quite as easily as castles, and with very much the same result. And all the while, as I mused, my inexorable judge went on to arraign me as guilty of contriving, or being accessory to, the ruin of the friend I loved best in all the world. Neither could I convince myself that he spoke without reason, supposing that he still remained opposed to our union. Then I forgot my dignity, and tried to soften him; but I might as well have pleaded with Rhadamanthus himself; he would do anything for me, assist me in any plan I might form, if only I would there and then "*give Gilbert up.*" *Only!* that was all! He *only* required the perfect and entire renunciation of my brightest hopes. He only wanted to take all the sweetness out of my cup of life, and leave its contents flavourless and unpalatable. He only wanted to take away my wine, and give me a wormwood draught instead; to rend from me the one jewel I thought to call my own, and to fill my hands with pebbles! Yes, that was all; his "only" consisted of so much and no more! Gilbert had warned me to be firm; but then he did not perceive what my firmness would do for him. Should I not really prove my love for him by letting him go—by pledging my word there and then to see him no more?

Mr. Saunderson saw that I faltered, and he followed up his advantage. I need not tell you half he said: how he argued, and threatened and warned; how he waxed eloquent, pointing out to me again and again the misery I should entail on Gilbert and on his family, the disappointment and the remorse I should be certain in process of time to experience myself, and the certain good that would result from the sacrifice I was now called to make. Once more I tried to turn him—to win him to say that in several years' time he might be brought to consider—only to *consider*—the proposed engagement. It was all in vain. I must there and then renounce Gilbert Tredgold, or he would renounce him utterly and for evermore.

At last I said that, if Gilbert were willing, I would give him up; I would not hold him to any promise he had made.

But that would not do, my tormentor told me; Gilbert

never would be willing to give up an attachment so formed, unless I took the initiative. I must perceive that, having foolishly pledged his word, he could not in honour withdraw it. The alternative could not rest with him. It was *I* who must act, I who must break the tie so lately formed, I who must be faithless in order to be truly faithful!

Oh! it was a weary hour. Still I wavered, and still this man, who seemed to have no heart, no pity in his breast, continued his representations, till I felt that only as Gilbert's enemy could I persist in retaining my hold on his affections. At length, hopeless, despairing, worn out, and nearly broken-hearted, I gave the required promise. Last night's sweet vow should not be kept; last night's brief understanding should be as if it had never been. Gilbert was free; and I—?

"You will think better of it, and marry your cousin."

"Never!" I returned, passionately. "Any fate but that!"

"What, then, will you do? Your position here will be an awkward one—indeed, I may say, untenable. If I can in any way—"

I interrupted him: "What I shall do cannot matter to you, Mr. Saunderson. Let it suffice you that you have won the victory. I will not be the obstacle in the way of Gilbert's advancement. I will not condemn him to a life of toil and obscurity. If you have to reproach him with 'ingratitude,' it shall not be my fault. Now I will leave you."

"One word more. You will not see Gilbert again? You will leave it to me to communicate the result of our conversation?"

I thought a little, and replied that it should be as he wished; for I saw nothing but wretchedness and cruel pain as the result of a last interview with Gilbert—though that he would accept my decision from any lips save my own I very greatly doubted. However, I knew what I would do.

I remember Mr. Saunderson thanking me, and saying that in future years the sacrifice of to-day would be the source of deepest pleasure and thanksgiving; I remember him taking my listless hands, and bidding me good-bye; I remember feeling that at last I was relieved from the

torture of his presence, and that all my life before me lay a blank, a bare monotony; and all the while the sun was shining, and the waves were leaping, and the children on the shore were shouting in their play, and a bee was humming about the flowers Gussie had gathered in the woods the day before.

How long I sat there I do not know: I suppose I did not faint, for I sat still in my chair; but I certainly did lose consciousness, for after awhile, the bright sky, and the flapping blinds, and the wild flowers, and the walls of the room itself, seemed fading from my sight, and I seemed to be awakened from a heavy sleep by some one standing in a mist—Mrs. Crofton it proved to be—offering me a glass of wine. I roused up and took it eagerly. In a moment the circumstances of my position forced themselves upon me; all the miserable truth flashed across my mind; it was no dream, and there was no time for weakness and inaction. I had my plan, and I would carry it out as swiftly as was possible.

Mrs. Crofton asked me what had happened—what had made me ill. I believed she knew, but I said I could not tell her then; Mr. Saunderson would let her know all about it. In the meantime, I asked one favour—to be let alone, to be unquestioned, and to spend the rest of the day in my own room.

Mrs. Crofton assented, saying that I had better lie down at once, and try to go to sleep—a piece of advice which I literally followed, for I was so worn out as to be unable to reflect; and the moment I laid my head on my pillow, in the silence of my own chamber, I fell into a sound and dreamless slumber. It was afternoon when I awoke, and I knew I had little time to lose; but my mind was quite clear now, my hands scarcely trembled at all, and my energies were altogether recruited.

I rang for some tea, and Gussie brought it to me. There was no one else at home, she said, except the servants. My uncle was gone to spend the day at Bristol; Mrs. Crofton, and Sibyl, and Tom were taking tea with some friends on the Esplanade, and Gilbert's name was not mentioned. I

ate and drank as best I might, for I wanted strength; then, kissing Gussie, I bade her leave me again, for I was going to be busy. The moment she was gone I packed up some clothes and a few books; I filled a carpet-bag and a valise, and carried them downstairs myself into the room where in the morning I had voluntarily sealed my fate. Then I went back, and dressed myself in bonnet and cloak, and stepped out to some mews close at hand, and begged them to send a fly to Mendip House immediately. I did not dare to take leave of Gussie, but I scribbled her a little note, and left it on the pincushion in our bedroom. The fly came, and I desired the man to drive me quickly to the station. I could just catch the next train to Cotswoldbury; for there I must go first, in order to obtain some of my property left at home—some things that I should want, and some few treasures that I never meant to part with. *Then* I meant to continue my journey: Cotswoldbury was only the first stage on my road to *London!*

CHAPTER XXXV.

AN OPPORTUNE MEETING.

THE autumn evening was fast closing in when I reached the station, and it suddenly occurred to me that, unless the trains matched well, I should arrive at Cotswoldbury in the middle of the night. I had always travelled with my cousins first-class, as a matter of course; but now it would have been but a measure of prudence had I chosen the lowest fare of all. I was too much pre-occupied, however, to think as yet about economic measures—my only anxiety was to get away from Cleeve-super-Mare as fast as possible; therefore, I asked hurriedly for my ticket, paid for it without counting the change, and rushed into the first empty compartment of a first-class carriage which came in my way. It was a wonder that I took the right train; but, happily for me, there was no amalgamation on the short loop-line, and I could scarcely go wrong till I got to Bristol. Otherwise,

I should doubtless have found myself flying at express speed towards the Land's End, rather than to Cotswoldbury.

Before I had at all composed myself, the train stopped at Yaxley Junction, and the porters were crying out "All change here," &c., and I knew that I had performed the first stage of my journey. Another train was in readiness to take us up, and, being rather behind time, and the railway officials in an unamiable state of mind, we were hurried into our places without any choice of our own; I, especially, being slightly distraught, and, of course, utterly undecided as to the next step I should take, was accosted most unceremoniously by the guard—

"Now then, Miss! Going on?"

"Yes, to Cotswoldbury—that is, to Bristol."

"What class?"

I showed my ticket, and was hoisted into a carriage close at hand, very much as if I had been a stupid child. The door was banged to, the signal given, and the train was once more upon its way. Then I saw I had companions—a gentleman and a lady; but the light depending from the roof of the compartment was so dim that I could discern little beyond the outline of their figures, though gradually I made out that the gentleman was elderly and in clerical attire, and that the lady was rather fashionably dressed in deepest mourning. And, having unconsciously, as it were, ascertained so much, I thought no more about them, being too much absorbed in my own great sorrow to care about surroundings, whether animate or otherwise. Slowly I was beginning to realise the fact that I had by my own act and deed divided myself for ever from Gilbert. Had I really done well? Had I not acted, as I too often did, from mere impulse? Had I not failed to ask guidance in this most important epoch of my life?

Yes, truly; I had rushed away without taking counsel of any human creature. That, however, was not of so much import; for does it not happen in all lives that crises arrive when one must depend solely on one's own self for support and for advice—when one can admit no confidant, no sharer

in perplexity? It does, indeed, so happen, as most elderly people who read these pages will unhesitatingly say; but then they, in their day of loneliness and bewilderment, perhaps sought the ear of their Almighty Friend, who is always to be trusted, who is always ready to attend even to the unuttered plaint of the miserable one, who will certainly lead the baffled wanderer into paths of safety, and guide the tempest-tossed into the haven. I had *not* committed my cause to Him who is the Father of the fatherless; I had not said to Him, "Show me the right path, lead me in the way wherein I should go;" I had not trusted for direction; I had relied entirely upon myself; and that on the impulse of the hour, not after grave reflection. Still, I came to the conclusion that so far I was right. I knew I should never have persisted in renouncing Gilbert if he had been at my side to plead for himself; I knew that he would have despised the great advantages his patron promised him while they were the concomitants of such a sacrifice; I knew that he would have remained faithful to me at any risk: but had I not thus renounced him, would he not have suffered in the days to come? would not those dear ones at St. Eldred's have suffered also? Yes; it was well that we should part; he would think so in due time. And I, who had not prayed for myself, prayed earnestly for him that he might be comforted now and made happy presently. My flight would give him pain. And then a horrible idea took possession of my mind; might it not be misrepresented to him? might he not be convinced that I really was *unworthy* of his love? The dread of this possible misfortune, which had not occurred to me before, almost took away my senses, and I leaned back on the cushions, the tears streaming down my cheeks in the friendly darkness, and the lumbering of the train drowning the sobs that else would have been quite audible to my fellow-passengers; and then I cried from the depths of my heart, "O my God! let it not be so. From this last anguish, good Lord, deliver me; take care of Thy poor wayward child, and guide her safe among the shoals and quicksands that beset her course. O Lord, she is

friendless and alone: be Thou her friend, her helper, and her comforter."

Already the lights of Clifton were twinkling on the rocky heights across the river; already we were in the suburbs of Bristol, when I noticed that the young lady was looking at me very earnestly, and I started and drew my blue veil closer, for I did not wish to be recognised by any chance acquaintance; and, dim as was the flickering oil-lamp, and misty as were my eyes with tears, I yet thought I discerned through the folds of gauze before my face a form and an attitude not altogether unfamiliar. While I was trying to think where I could have met the lady before, her companion's face was entirely shrouded from my view, for he lay back deep in shadow, and a travelling cap with lappets served sufficiently to disguise him had he been an intimate friend. The train stopped, and the young lady started up to look for the tickets which were committed to her care. Then I was sure I knew her. Was it—could it be—Cecilia Churchman, with whom I still carried on a lagging correspondence, fast dying out for want of mutual interests? We had never seen each other since, after our hasty vows of friendship, we had parted at the coach-office several years before; and, though at first we had written foolish, impassioned letters full of loves and protestations, and though we had duly discussed our grievances, and poured out our sorrows into each other's sympathising bosoms, the time soon came when I cared little for a letter from Cecilia, and hers, by their increasing brevity and unfrequency, proved that our silly love at first sight was fast dying out from lack of nourishment. While I was still undecided she spoke to me: "You are alone! Can we help you with your luggage? Are you going further on?"

It was Cecilia; there was no mistaking her rapid tones and rather abrupt address: and before I could answer intelligibly, she had seized my hand, exclaiming, "I was sure of it! I knew it was Margaret Torrington! I saw your face when you looked out at the last station; and, though it is wonderfully altered, I knew it again. I knew your

eyes, and your curls, and I knew that little enamelled cross, with the one diamond in it! You showed it me, if you remember, as a relic of your mother and your grandmother, when I showed you some ornaments of mine. As soon as ever I caught sight of the diamond sparkling through the semi-darkness, I made up my mind! I knew who you were, but I determined to hear your voice before I claimed acquaintance."

Then followed a long string of questions, which I found it difficult to answer. I told Cecilia and her father—for he too turned inquisitor, and tormented me not a little—that I had been at Cleeve-super-Mare with my uncle's family, that I was going to Cotswoldbury at once, and then proceeding "to London, in order to take a situation."

"What an independent girl you are!" said Cecilia; "but it must be very pleasant to be thrown entirely on one's own resources, I should think."

I shivered, and thought how little she knew about it. Mr. Churchman remarked that Mrs. Crofton ought not to have permitted me to travel by so late a train, since I was unaccompanied. Would any one meet me at Bristol?

"No! I was going on immediately."

"I doubt whether there will be a train," said Mr. Churchman; and, indeed, when the question came to be asked on the Bristol platform, it proved that there would be no train till past ten, and that I should, consequently, arrive at Cotswoldbury about midnight. All at once I felt in how difficult a position I was placed. What could I say in order to explain my sudden appearance at so unseasonable an hour? Already I began to see how much I risked in accomplishing this, as it seemed to me, necessary evasion.

"Go on to Cotswoldbury to-night!" cried Cecilia in her excited way. "Are you on an errand of life and death, Margaret? No? Well, then, you shall do as you did before, spend the night with us at Kingsdown, and go on your journey as soon as you like to-morrow morning. The coach has ceased to run to Westonbury now, you know, and there are plenty of trains to choose from. What packages have

you? They may as well remain here, unless you will think better of it, and stay a few days with me. What do you say?"

"I would rather go on at once, if you please. Perhaps Mrs. Churchman may consider it a liberty; and perhaps—"

"Mrs. Churchman! Have you not heard? Did I not write? Well, I really thought I did. And so you do not know that Mrs. Churchman is—well—*gone to glory*, or else the other way."

She stopped short, seeing me look extremely shocked, not at the news of the poor drab lady's decease, but at the dreadful irreverence of her step-daughter. Cecilia was greatly changed, I thought, and for the worse. Still, it seemed to me, under the circumstances, that the best thing I could do was to accept her invitation, provided her father did not disapprove. He was at some distance from us, solemnly haranguing the porters, and shaking his head in the direction of the luggage-van. Surely, this unforeseen meeting was providentially ordered; for here was protection of the most undeniable respectability; it could not be brought against me that I was wandering about in the dark hours without suitable escort, if I went home with Mr. Churchman and his daughter, and on the morrow I could reach Cotswoldbury easily by daylight, and not excite any undue astonishment. Also, in case of misrepresentation, which more and more I felt I had to expect from Sibyl, and perhaps from Tom, there were two persons to whom reference could be made as to my journey so far; and, besides, I should have a few hours to recruit my strength, and to decide more clearly on my future course.

So, when Mr. Churchman formally, but still kindly, seconded his daughter's request, adding that he could not answer for it to his conscience if he let me proceed alone that night, I felt that this was indeed an interposition of Providence on my behalf, and I gratefully thanked him and Cecilia, and, after seeing my luggage stowed away in the cloak-room, accompanied them to the fly which was waiting for us.

Once more I was rattled down the dreary length of Temple-street, across Bristol-bridge, through the antiquated city, and up the hill which led to the seemingly inaccessible eyrie of Kingsdown. It seemed but the other day since, in company with the elderly gentleman now beside me, I had made the self-same journey: but then I was a child comparatively; now I was a woman, with all a woman's cares, and griefs, and perplexities—beset, too, by perils which as yet I only dimly comprehended. Oh! how I longed for some safe haven, some secure abode, where I might rest my weariness, where I might hide myself away from the strife of tongues, from all unkindness, all cruel slander, and especially from the aching pain for which I knew no remedy. I must bear it and be brave; that was all. But *could* I bear it long? Twenty-four hours ago I was happy in spite of all inimical surroundings; for my future and Gilbert's were to be one. Now they must be for ever dissociated: my very love for him demanded that it should be so.

Slowly we wound up the steep slope of the Horfield-road, and very soon we were stopping before the highly-respectable dark green door in the high stone wall I so well remembered. And Cecilia, not waiting for assistance, sprang out and pulled the bell, exclaiming, with delight at being at her journey's end—At home! Oh! when should I be "at home?" What should I find at my journey's end?

I followed Miss Churchman into the drab-coloured drawing-room, where no longer sat any drab-coloured matron nursing a cat of the same dull hue, and reading, with solemn air, the *Record* newspaper! Under Cecilia's rule the room had somewhat changed its character—its prevailing tint of drabness was gone, there were green and amber shades in the carpet, the hearthrug was all roses and lilies and fern-leaves, and on it reposed a sleek tortoiseshell pussy, much handsomer than her favoured predecessor.

"You see I have made some alterations," said Cecilia, when we were up-stairs, taking off our bonnets: "a new carpet was really wanted, and I bought one—not gaudy, of course, but lively and of a good pattern; and papa said it

was 'worldly;' but he did not see it till it was down, and then, of course, it could not be altered; and by-and-by he came to like it, and then I got the hearthrug, and some pretty chimney ornaments. Now I am going in for suitable window-drapery; and before the winter is over I shall have the spare bedroom entirely refurnished. And, when my mourning is over, will I not dress to please myself! How long *ought* one to wear mourning for a step-mother, Margaret?"

"I have no idea," I replied, wearily. Oh? how foolish, how *little*, seemed to me all this babble about curtains and carpets, and new furniture!

"How long has Mrs. Churchman been dead?" I asked, presently;—not that I cared to know, but I felt it was not right to be Cecilia's guest, and maintain the silence I so longed for.

"Let me see! Three—four months nearly; she died in June. Bless me! I wonder if she is happy where she is gone?"

I looked up in wonder, as well I might.

"Why," continued Cecilia, "she was always routing about committees, and this society, and that society. She cared a thousand times more about the unknown aborigines of the Hullabaloo Islands—about their souls, and about their bodies—than about any wretched creature who might be perishing down there in Bristol streets. In order to secure Mrs. Churchman's sympathies, it was necessary to be black, or at least copper-coloured. She would have liked me a great deal better, and she would have laboured night and day for my conversion, if I had only been a dingy mulatto, hideously tattooed, and attired solely in a blanket! What she will do *up there* I cannot think; for there can be no Ladies' Committees to be held, no official correspondence to carry on, no one to patronise! You looked shocked, Margaret."

"I am," I replied, gravely: "I cannot think such levity right, Cecilia."

I expected a haughty rejoinder, but she came flying up

to me from the wardrobe where she was stowing away her bonnet, exclaiming, "Now, that is a darling to tell me of my faults! to tell me, too, straight out, and not talk *at me*. I can bear anything but *that;* its makes me savage as a bearess and irreligious as the cannibal Queen of the Hullabaloo Islands herself. But, Margaret, you are altered very much—strangely altered. Of course, you have grown up, and all that, but still you are more changed than I should have expected."

"I am changed," I replied sadly. "I have had much to sober me, Cecilia: there have been more thorns than roses in my path since we parted. Some of my trials you know; I am ashamed now to think how fully I wrote to you about them. I have had others since, and my future is very uncertain."

After supper, when we were again alone, she reverted to what I had said about my future, and besought me to tell her my plans and "all about it." But I felt instinctively that Cecilia Churchman would not be a safe or a discreet *confidante*. I told her only that I was very unhappy in my uncle's family; that circumstances had shown me that the time was come for me to exert myself, to enter upon a life of work and honest independence; that I could scarcely say as yet what I proposed doing, but that I meant to labour with head and with hands for daily bread, and shelter, and decent raiment.

"Tell me one thing," she asked eagerly when we were in bed, and I was hoping that she would fall asleep and leave me to pursue my own sad train of thought. "Tell me, Margaret, are you *engaged?*"

"I am not," I replied shortly.

"But there is something of the kind? I am sure of it. Tell me all about it, there's a darling. If *I* can do anything—"

"But you cannot, thank you. And, please, Cecilia, do not let us talk on this subject; there has been 'something,' as you say, and my heart is very sore—so sore that I wish it would break and end the weary pain. But I cannot speak about it."

"Poor Margaret," she said, feelingly, passing her arm caressingly around my neck; "I am so sorry for you, dear. I wish you *would* confide in me: you cannot think how many love affairs I have helped in. And I have an affair of my own, too; and we are going to be married some day, when papa consents, or perhaps, if he is tiresome, without his consenting. He doesn't like my Eustace, because he plays at cards, and goes to theatres, and is dreadfully High Church; and yet Eustace says—"

But what Eustace said I was never privileged to learn; for here Miss Churchman fell asleep, and I, notwithstanding my load of sorrow, followed her example speedily. And only last night I was sleeping, or, rather, waking, by my darling Gussie's side. It cost me no slight pang to part with her; only the great misery of leaving Gilbert without one adieu overpowered every other sense of wretchedness.

I consulted a *Bradshaw* while I was taking my breakfast, and found a train I thought would suit me; and by eleven o'clock I had bidden Cecilia and her father farewell, and was on my way to Cotswoldbury. But, before we parted, Cecilia said to me—bluntly, of course—"Margaret, have you plenty of money?"

I coloured, and replied that I had what was requisite for the present, and I meant to earn more.

"But suppose you *can't* earn more? suppose you can't find a place, or—what is it—a situation? Here, now, let me lend you five pounds; I have lots of money—more than I know what to do with; you can pay me back again, you know."

"No, thank you, dear; it is very, very kind of you; but I must not begin life with a debt."

"A debt! What nonsense! It is only a debt if you will make it so. Take it, Margaret, and keep it for ever,—that is, count it as your own. My prophetic soul tells me you will want it."

"I would rather not, Cecilia; but, believe me, I feel your kindness quite as much as if I took it."

She reasoned on, and coaxed and scolded, but I would not be persuaded; and finally, the train started, without

her having, as I thought, carried her point. But the last thing she produced from her own reticule, a flask of sherry and a paper of sandwiches, as if I were going a journey of two hundred miles there and then; also a bag of biscuits, and a box of her favourite chocolate *bonbons*, which a Bristol confectioner, she informed me, imported from Paris solely on her account. She chattered about the *bonbons* volubly, even when the train was moving, and I went on my way, thinking what a strange compound of real goodness and levity this girl was. I thought more, however, of her real goodness and kindness of heart when, that evening, taking out my undiminished flask of sherry, I found tied round the neck of the bottle a little bag, containing the five sovereigns I had refused.

Surely, God was watching over me; surely He had sent the Churchmans to cheer me on my way, and help me in my hour of loneliness and need.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

ANOTHER "FRIEND IN NEED."

WHEN I reached Cotswoldbury, and saw the dreary station, with which I was so familiar, and the well-known crescents and terraces of the Lansdowne and Montpelier quarters, I could hardly believe but that I had dreamed a wretched, miserable dream, and should presently awake, and find myself at Mendip House, with Gussie by my side.

It all seemed real enough, however, when I reached Crofton Lawn, and was received by the amazed servants, who, with little idea of an incursion from Cleeve-super-Mare, were evidently giving a dinner-party in their own settlements. It was past noon, and I had but scant leisure for all that lay before me, for I had determined not to stay the night at Cotswoldbury. Hastily I collected my different properties, and packed them with Rebecca's assistance in less than two hours; then I went over the house that had sheltered

me so long, and into the garden, where I gathered an autumn nosegay from the little plot that Gussie and I cultivated together. I would fain have paid a visit to the Norths, but such an indulgence was manifestly impracticable if I meant to get away by the evening train, and yet transact all the business that remained to me at Cotswoldbury. Besides, I did not wish to implicate them in the matter of my flight; —if it came to good, all well—if not, the blame and odium of my proceedings attached only to myself.

But there was one person whom it was necessary that I should speak with—one person whose good offices I *must* claim, in order to ensure the slightest measure of success in the new adventurous path before me; and that person was my kind friend and music-master, Mr. Scott.

My packages being all ready, I drove away from Crofton Lawn, and, going straight to the station, bestowed my luggage in the cloak-room; and then I turned my steps in the direction of Lineover-terrace, where Mr. Scott lived, and where I hoped to find him at that hour of the day—for I knew his engagements and his habits pretty well. With some trepidation I rang the bell of No. 7. What if he were absent from home! what if I had to go away without an interview! I could scarcely command breath to ask the servant who answered the door if Mr. Scott were at home, and disengaged.

"At home," she said, hesitatingly, "but engaged at present,"—it was the master's dinner-hour. I told her I could wait, and sent in my name; and she showed me into the little drawing-room, which seemed to be nearly filled up with a grand pianoforte, a couple of bass viols, a violoncello, a canterbury, several music-stands, heaps of music-books, and any quantity of loose music, which, for lack of better accommodation, was piled up in all the corners of the room. I had not long to wait—indeed, I had scarcely seated myself and untied my bonnet that I might breathe more freely, when Mr. Scott came in, his dinner-napkin still in his hand, and his moustache bearing witness to the "engagement" in which I had disturbed him.

"Miss Torrington, have you dined?" was the first question, when ordinary greetings were disposed of.

Dined, indeed! I had tried to eat some bread-and-butter at Crofton Lawn, in order to please Rebecca, who was aghast at the idea of my going away on a journey fasting—and I had literally choked in the attempt.

"No. I should not dine till late," I answered, hastily; "and I had just left the luncheon-tray. I wanted to speak to Mr. Scott on very particular business, but I would rather wait till he had finished his dinner."

"I have quite finished," he replied; "but cannot I tempt you to take something? A cutlet now, or a little bit of damson tart, with custard? Mrs. Scott will be honoured. *Do*, Miss Torrington."

"No, I thank you, Mr. Scott; I cannot eat—I am too much excited, too sorrowful."

"My dear young lady, I am very sorry. Can I serve you in any way? If I can, pray command me."

"Do you say so sincerely, Mr. Scott?"

"Of course I do. You are my favourite pupil, you know. I never had one who did me such decided credit; I never had one who gave me so much satisfaction, so much unmingled pleasure. I may say Miss Augusta Crofton promises fairly, but she will never rival her cousin, I should imagine—she will never have your voice."

"It is about that very voice I want to speak to you. You once told me that if I were not a gentlewoman I might make my fortune by it. Was that veritable truth, or a compliment?"

"The simple, veritable truth, Miss Torrington. I only wish I were going to 'produce you;' I should do so with unfeigned pride, and should be certain of success."

"Well, Mr. Scott, you cannot 'produce' me—which, I suppose, means introduce me—because your work and your connection is altogether in this neighbourhood, and I am going to London. Let me be explicit. I am going to work for my living. Can I do it? Can I become a teacher of music? and can I engage myself as a professional singer?"

"You can teach music as well as I can myself; and I would give anything to have your gift of improvisation. You could scarcely engage yourself as a professional singer *immediately*, because a certain training would be required: to sing in a drawing-room and to sing in an orchestra or on the stage are different matters. Still, you would catch the *aplomb* and style very readily; you have a *prima donna's* voice, if you manage it discreetly. But, my dear young lady, have you considered how painful it will be to one brought up as you have been? have you counted the cost? Above all, what will your relations say?"

"I place entire confidence in you, Mr. Scott; therefore I tell you at once what you will surely hear from others presently. I have left my relations. I have severed myself entirely from them. I return no more to Crofton Lawn. When I leave your house, I take the next train to London." Mr. Scott looked distressed, and uncertain what to say; but presently he asked earnestly: "Is this wise, Miss Torrington? Had you not better bear little harassments and slights? Such a home as you have, or had, is of infinite importance to you at your age. There is a crook in every lot, you know, and every one has to bear the yoke some time or other;—better in youth, Miss Margaret—better in youth! Forgive me for intruding my advice; but I am old enough to be your father, and I know the world and its dangers, and you are young, and inexperienced, and—hasty in your judgments; I have noted it a score of times. I would not have one of my girls go unbefriended and unprotected to London; no, not if she were to come out as the star of the opera in three years' time! Oh, my dear young lady, do consider."

"I have considered, Mr. Scott. Believe me, this resolve, though hastily carried out, is the result of long and grave reflection. I cannot tell you why it is so, but I can say sincerely that no petty annoyances, no slight crosses, are driving me from my uncle's house. It is an absolute necessity that I go away, and that no one should know the place of my abode. I have done nothing wrong, I assure you—

nothing that my father's daughter need blush to own; and yet circumstances have arisen—oh, Mr. Scott, *such* circumstances! But I cannot explain. I go to escape doing a great wrong. I go as a duty—a painful one, believe me. As you would wish your own daughter to find help in her extremity, should it ever arrive, *help me now*, and God will reward you."

My poor child," he said kindly, "you have suffered cruelly—I see it in your face. May I be pardoned if I ask whether this trouble has arisen in any way through your cousin, Mr. Tom? Before you went away all Cotswoldbury said you were engaged to him; indeed, Mrs. Crofton told me so herself—not in so many words, indeed, but she said, speaking of Miss Gussie's lessons, 'when Tom and Margaret are married, Mr. Scott.' I am afraid Mr. Tom is to blame."

"I never was engaged to Tom—not for one hour; I refused him emphatically the moment he proposed. There has been a scheme, a snare laid for me; but, thank God, I have escaped it."

"Thank God, indeed! I could not tell you what Mr. Tom is; it is enough to say that I would horsewhip him, though it were my ruin, if he dared to make love to one of my girls. Love proffered by such a scapegrace is an insult to any pure-minded woman. But, Miss Margaret, they could not *force* you to marry him; we have got beyond the age of abductions, and bribed clergymen, and such enormities. Forced marriages and Gretna-green elopements have gone out together; the telegraph, the detective police, and the penny post have made us utterly prosaic. Is it absolutely necessary that you should *run away?*"

"Absolutely! My cousin Tom furnishes only half the reasons why I should go utterly away—there are other reasons still more cogent, still more imperative; but I cannot give them you—at least not now. Oh, Mr. Scott, do not question me. I cannot bear it! Trust me and help me."

"I will trust you, and I will help you to the best of my

ability; but I must ask a question or two more respecting your plans."

"Ask me what you choose about the future: it is the past I cannot touch upon."

"You are going to London, you say?"

"Yes. I can hide myself best there; and London is certainly the place for any one who wishes to succeed."

"Provided you have introductions, which I shall give you. But you cannot get to town to-night. I suppose you would not go to Mrs. Druce?"

"No, indeed! I do not wish to meet with any of my own relations; and London is so wide a place that I suppose I may live there for half a century and never encounter any one I used to know. There will be no fear of Mrs. Druce finding me out."

"No; unless professional engagements take you to the West-end. But about to-night. Will you not remain here in charge of my good wife, and set off for town early to morrow morning?"

"No, I will not, Mr. Scott; for it might be known that you had so kindly sheltered me; and if such a fact came to the knowledge of the Croftons, your own prospects might be seriously injured. For your sake, as well as for mine, I do not wish any one to know you have befriended me. I mean to stay at Blackingham all night—at some decent inn—and go on to London by an early train to-morrow."

"It is dreadful to me—a father as I am—to think of your being at inns alone and unprotected."

"Mr. Scott, if I am true to myself I need not fear. I am not a child, and I am not constitutionally timid: I have also pretty keen perceptions, and what people call 'a spirit of my own.'—Besides, I trust in God: I have committed my way to Him, and I feel that He will, that He *is* guiding me!"

"If it be so, you have little to fear indeed; only continue, my dear young lady, to put your trust in Him;—do not rely on your own strength, or on your own prudence. 'In all thy ways acknowledge Him, and He will direct thy

paths.' But when you reach London, what do you purpose doing? When the train lands you in Euston-square, whither will you bend your steps?"

"I do not know at all. I must take decent, but cheap lodgings in an out-of-the-way part of London—that is one point on which I desired to consult you."

"Happily I am in a position to be of use in this matter. But too retired a district will scarcely suit your purpose. What say you to the neighbourhood of Bloomsbury?"

"I can say nothing, Mr. Scott; I never was in London in my life. I have heard of Bloomsbury, but I do not know it."

"I mention Bloomsbury for two reasons; the one being that it is highly eligible for a professional person; nicely central, and yet within an easy distance of the West-end; also highly respectable, though no longer aristocratic. The other, and still stronger reason, is, that I have a relation living in King-street, Southampton-row, and she, I fancy, can accommodate you. At any rate, if I write to her this evening, she will receive you to-morrow, and lodge you comfortably for the night, and afterwards assist you in whatever arrangements you may have to make."

"Can I ever thank you sufficiently, Mr. Scott? My heart sank within me when I thought of reaching London without knowing where to find a shelter; and I dared not have trusted to the advice of strangers. You are very, very kind. May God bless you for it!"

"It is no more than I hope some Christian soul would do for one of my own girls in similar difficulties. My Charlotte is just about your age, Miss Torrington; and I have as you know, younger children—my little Polly is only seven! Perhaps some day you will more than repay the slight services I am proud to render you, in kindness to her or to one of her sisters; there is no saying how soon or how greatly my children may need a friend. But to return to business:—I will write at once to Mrs. Brown, tell her what it is necessary she should know of your peculiar circumstances, and ask her to meet your train to-morrow at the

Euston-square terminus. I may as well tell you that Mrs. Brown is my cousin. She is not what you would consider *a lady;* but she is a superior sort of woman, kind and motherly, and *to be relied on!* She has been a widow many years, and she lets part of her house in King-street, and I doubt not, if she can possibly contrive it, she will accommodate you at very reasonable charges; I can leave you in her hands with the greatest confidence."

"Again I say, I can never properly thank you."

"Then do not try. Dear me! we should not be Christians if we did not help each other in our extremities. Now, I am going to Mrs. Scott to ask her to send you in a cup of coffee. Nay! it is vain to protest; you do not leave my house until you have taken some refreshment. I know how you feel; but this is not a time to let feelings have their way; you must eat and drink if you are to do any work worth speaking of. It will never do to arrive at Blackingham faint and ill, with strangers all around you. Now—please forgive me, but I know young ladies have such romantic notions on this score—how are you provided with money?"

"I have calculated that when I reach Euston-square I shall have three or four pounds left; also, I have some ornaments that I *could* sell, if need were."

"If you should be in pecuniary difficulty presently, will you promise to apply to me?"

"I cannot make such a promise. Dear Mr. Scott, you have been quite good enough to me as it is. Only say that I may, if requisite, refer to you on the points of respectability and competency."

"I will send you introductory letters that will answer every purpose; and I dare say Mrs. Brown will be able to find you pupils. She has promised my Charlotte several if she will go up to town and try her fortunes. Only be brave, my child, trust in God, be content to work hard and patiently, and all will be well."

He went away, leaving me to cry a little for very thankfulness. Now, indeed, I recognized a Father's hand. How

marvellously all had come about, and yet how naturally! There was not an atom of the sensational element in my experiences; and yet, so far, every difficulty had been smoothed away, and my path made clear before me. Surely God was in all this! I had called upon Him, and He had heard me, and He had done for me great things. Must I not henceforth say, "Bless the Lord, O my soul; and all that is within me bless His holy name?" And would He not in due time make all things straight? Would He not lead me into the very paths which were best and happiest for me? Would He not, if it were good for me, if it were His holy will concerning me, give me the desire of my heart, and *certainly* bring me to the haven where I would be? If not to a haven of earthly rest and joy, such as I had pictured to myself two days before, yet surely to the everlasting haven—to the city which hath foundations, where all is peace and bliss unspeakable.

I was roused by the return of Mr. Scott, and this time his wife accompanied him, bringing in my coffee and biscuits herself; for with true delicacy she divined that I would rather not just then see or be seen by a servant. Oh, how kind to me these excellent people were! and how much more goodness there is in the world than at first sight is apparent!

The first spoonful of coffee seemed to choke me, and something like a spasm rose in my throat and threatened suffocation; but I persevered, for I saw my friends were very anxious that I should be physically strengthened, and I knew that flesh and blood, without due nourishment, must speedily succumb, however brave the spirit. And I could not afford to succumb—I had too much before me; and it behoved me to husband among my resources the health and strength which God had mercifully given me. I managed by degrees to make a tolerable meal; and really, the hot, strong coffee and the nice crisp biscuits did me an infinitude of good. I felt quite another woman when my cup was emptied, and quite ready to set out anew upon my lonely journey.

Mrs. Scott went down with me to the station, for at that hour her husband had an appointment with a pupil, and I cast many a farewell glance at the familiar streets as for the last time—for many a day, perhaps—I walked through Cotswoldbury. There was the beautiful Promenade, the noblest in all England, the splendid *boulevard* of my native land—should I ever walk beneath those green, overarching canopies again? And—oh! there was *Upping's* shop, and young James Upping standing at the door speaking to some one; and he bowed as we passed, for he knew Mrs. Scott as well as myself. I longed to go in and buy something, that I might recall the day when, after our long separation, I had met Gilbert there. No place in Cotswoldbury would henceforth be dearer to my memory than Upping's shop. Should I ever enter it again?

Very soon I had said farewell to my companion, very soon the spires of Cotswoldbury had faded from my tearful gaze, and I could see the bright town no longer, though I knew the spot where it nestled under the broad shadow of the Woldscotes. Then came the Abbey towers of Tewkestone, then the grey cathedral pile of Wulfstanleigh, then the smoke and dirt of Saltwich, then quiet villages and tiny towns, farms, orchards, stubble-fields, and, last of all, the red-brick ugliness of Balsall-town, one of the environs of the great midland metropolis of Blackingham. I was glad enough when the train stopped, for I was growing very weary. A civil porter collected all my luggage, and asked me if I did not want a "car," for so they call four-wheel hackney-carriages in Blackingham. Supposing a "car" to be identical with a "fly," I replied in the affirmative, and, thinking how very kind and fatherly the porter looked, I ventured to ask him to recommend me to a decent inn near to the station; which he did: and soon I was comfortably established for the night.

I saw little of Blackingham save its tall chimneys, pouring out volumes of black smoke, and certain dingy streets and miserable courts, and steaming hot canals; for the station was not then, as it is now, in Old-street, which is, without

exception, one of the finest provincial streets I ever saw, but in the worst part of the town. And I was glad when the last railway sheds were passed, and we were once again in the open country—uninteresting, and bleak, and flat enough, certainly, but still *country*, which the black smoke could not reach, though the glaring red-brick and slated roofs were distinguishable everywhere.

About half-past two I found that we were approaching London; and, like all other unsophisticated country folk, I fancied that I was actually in the metropolis itself many miles before we reached it. When we stopped by the ticket platform at Camden-town I supposed I was in Euston-square, and was going to get out and look for Mrs. Brown. I was soon set right, however, and in a few minutes we really were at the terminus itself, and all the bustle incident to the arrival of a train had commenced before I left the carriage. I looked out for somebody who might be Mrs. Brown; but—oh! the crowd, the bustle, the confusion! How could anybody find anybody in such a tumult?

But while I was looking pitifully about me, a kind-faced elderly woman came up to me, holding a letter in her hand so as to display the address, and inquiring, in a gentle voice, "Is this Miss Torrington?" Then my troubles were over: she took possession of me at once, she saw to my luggage, she had a four-wheel cab in waiting, and together we drove away through the squares to King-street, Southampton-row.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

MY NEW HOME.

WAS London all squares! I wondered; for we drove through *three* successively on our journey to Southampton-row, and only a short distance, by the way. Then we were in Southampton-row, the lower part of which, running into High Holborn, used to be called King-street in those days; and presently before a stationer's and fancy repository, where all sorts of pretty and useful things seemed to be on

sale, the cab drew up, and, looking out, I saw over the shop-window, "Martha Brown, Stationer and Bookseller," and over the door, "Berlin-wools and Patterns."

Entering the shop, a very spruce damsel of twenty-five, or thereabouts, came from behind the counter, and contemplated me with a kindly but yet inquisitive expression. "So you're come back, mother!" she said; "and you've managed to find Miss Torrington!"

"Yes, I knew her in a minute from Cousin Gerard's description. This is my daughter, Miss Torrington—my only unmarried daughter, Jane Brown."

Miss Jane Brown curtsied, and extended her hand. I am ashamed to say I felt some small hesitation about taking it; for the idea of shaking hands with any one behind a counter had never yet occurred to me. But the next moment I took the proffered hand heartily; for it was given with so much evident goodwill that I experienced a sudden contempt for my own paltriness of feeling, and I said to myself, "And who are you, Margaret Torrington, that despise honest labour and a lawful calling? Is there more degradation in selling envelopes, and Penelope-canvass, and crochet-needles, and *papier maché* inkstands, and ring-trays than in teaching children to count four crotchets to the bar, and play five-finger exercises? No, indeed! and degradation has nothing at all to do with it. Idleness and dependency may degrade one, verily; but never earnest, God-fearing labour —never *work* of any kind on which God's blessing may be asked." But I had many a lesson to learn, and this first one came to me ere I crossed the threshold of Mrs. Brown's comfortable parlour.

Then my new kind friend led me to the sofa, and began to untie my bonnet, saying as she did so, "There, dear! rest a bit; you look dreadfully pale and wearied. Put your feet up if you like. Your room, I am sorry to say, is at the top of the house, and so is mine; so I will not take you there just yet. We will have tea presently, and a nice rasher of ham with it, and Jane will come in and talk to you. She is my youngest and last house-daughter. All the rest

are married; and one has married a Mr. Green, and one a Mr. White. Isn't it funny? They have changed their colour, everybody says. And Jane hoped to find a Mr. Black, or a Mr. Scarlett, but a certain Mr. Wright came in her way last midsummer twelve months, and she fancies he will do as well. Jane will be so glad to have a companion as young as you are; youth inclines to youth, you know, my dear, and I am getting old, and years ago I had my share of trouble. Ah, my dear, we all get it some time or other; the good Lord knows we want it to humble us, and to teach us, and to make us cast our care on Him who careth for us. Now, then, would you like to go upstairs?"

I followed Mrs. Brown to the top of the house, which was a story higher than my attic at Crofton Lawn; and there I found an airy, comfortable room, plainly but conveniently furnished, which she said could be mine if I chose to take it. It was the only one she had disengaged. And Cousin Gerard had intimated that I did not wish at first for expensive apartments, and this one, being so high up, of course was cheap, and her own room was close at hand, and the servant's on the other side the landing; and there was a dry box-room, where I could stow away anything I did not wish to lumber up my chamber with.

I replied by asking what the rent of the room might be, and was astonished to hear for how little I might be lodged and boarded.

I did not know then that I was indebted to Mr. Scott for this wonderful moderation; for Mrs. Brown, though a thoroughly conscientious woman, was not at all inclined to let her rooms below their value, and the sum she asked me was at least one-third less than she would have asked any one else who came without a similar recommendation.

The treaty, therefore, was concluded on the spot, and I looked round upon the attic-chamber as my own little castle, my private residence, where I was to spend my nights, and, doubtless, some portion of my days. I was to share the family sitting-room, and take my meals with them; but I felt how very precious would be the retirement I thus

secured in having even a single apartment of my own. It was quiet, too, for it was at the back of the house, and far above the continuous noises of the street; while the roar of the great thoroughfare, High Holborn, close at hand, subdued, and yet sustained, reminded me of the monotonous roll of the waves in fine weather at St. Eldred's. But when, for a few minutes, I was left alone, a dreary sense of desolation almost overpowered me, and I sat down on one of my rush-bottomed chairs, and gave myself up to a grief too deep for tears. Now, at least, I realized the completeness of the severance that had come to pass; now I felt, indeed, that Gilbert and I were parted, and a sad presentiment told me *for ever* in this world! Now I mourned over my darling Gussie; now I remembered, with aching heart, the bright visions I had cherished but three days before. Oh, that hour on the cliffs, that brief glimpse of happiness! Oh, that golden light upon the sea! The brilliance of those sweet hopes, the blissful radiance of that brief time, made the present seem unutterably dark and sad; and yet I would not for worlds that such hopes had never been. They would ever be to me most precious, most sacred; and I should think of the converse of that evening as one thinks of past communion with those who are gone before us to the heavenly world.

Still, I had abundant cause for thankfulness. My Father had manifestly interposed on my behalf; He had "ordered" my steps; He had led me safely on my dubious way. Should I not take courage, and trust Him for the rest? Ah! it was all Goodness, Heavenly Goodness, that had guided me, from the moment when I left Mendip House until the present hour. In my meeting with the Churchmans, in my arrangements for the journey, in my interview with Mr. Scott, and its thrice-blessed consequences, I saw the hand of Providence. I had not sought my Father, but He came to my assistance; before I called upon Him He heard me, and spread over me His shadow, and preserved me from the evil that might have been.

Surely now, *at last*—now, when all the earthly sunshine

had faded from my sky, when the waves rose dark and threatening, and my bark was rocking helplessly upon the angry surf—*now* I had on board *the Pilot Himself*. He who had stilled the tempest long ago—He who had blessed and guided many a weary soul through the long centuries that lay between that olden time and the very present "*now*" was with me truly; and through the silence and the solitude I heard His gentle voice saying to me, "My child, be not afraid; trust in *Me*, and I will guide you to the haven. All shall yet be well; for I will never leave thee nor forsake thee; and what thou knowest not now thou shalt know hereafter. Only believe and rest in Me." Yes, I heard those words spoken to my weary spirit, and my heart said, "Yea, Lord, I will trust in Thee! I commit my way to Thee. Only help me to believe, to trust Thee, and to love Thee as I ought; for surely this I cannot do unless Thou helpest me. I am nothing and Thou art all. I am a wayward, foolish child, and Thou art the Almighty Saviour. Oh, cause me to find my rest in Thee."

And rest and peace was given me. Now there was light upon the waters; now I could see—far off indeed, yet unmistakeably—the everlasting hills, and the walls of the Celestial City, whither I was bound. I had heard the voice of Jesus say, "I am this dark world's Light." He had bidden me look to Him, and lo! at the first glance I had seen "in Him my Star, my Sun," and I was ready to exclaim—

> "And in the light of life I'll walk
> Till travelling days be done."

I was roused soon by Mrs. Brown coming in, and asking me to come down to tea; and in the parlour I found Miss Jane busy with the toast. I wondered, as I looked at my companions, mother and daughter, whether they, too, had found the precious treasure I had just discovered. I longed to know, that if they were in ignorance, as I had been, I might tell them how much they were losing, and how great was the joy, even in the midst of keenest earthly suffering, of finding Christ and resting in His love.

I believe it is impossible that true religion can be other than diffusive. I believe it is the first sign of the life Divine in the human heart, which has been from its birth dead in trespasses and sins, that it longs to share with all around it the inestimable blessing it has itself received. It would give bountifully from its own exhaustless stores of peace and joy; and in the first flush of spiritual gladness it would fain say to all men, "See what the Lord has done for me. I was blind, and now I see; I was helpless, now I can do all things through a strength that is not mine, save as it is imparted to me; I was poor to destitution, now I am rich, and I am heir to a glory that cannot be conceived; I was dead, and now I live, and my life is hid with Christ in God, and death has no more dominion over me!"

Jane Brown took her place at the table, and began to pour out the tea; and in the clear, full gaslight, I was surprised to find how pretty she was, and how much she looked like a veritable lady. She was a little creature, but she seemed possessed of an inexhaustible fund of good temper and good spirits; and her manner to me was so kind, so thoroughly considerate, that I felt more than ever the despicable nature of the silly pride which had prompted me at the first moment to treat her with condescension. She had plenty to say, and very pleasantly she said it. Her voice was sweet and low, and her laugh quite musical, and, spite of all things, I could not help being entertained at some of the little stories she related. She was evidently doing her very best to cheer me; trying to take me out of myself, and not noticing my depression, which was about the wisest and kindest course she could have adopted; yet, through all, I felt I had her sympathy, though she was too delicate to do more than imply it.

"Mother," she said presently, when our second cups were filled, "had we not better put a card in the shop window for Miss Torrington?"

"Yes, certainly," replied Mrs. Brown. "You know we put one in for poor Mrs. Willis, and it brought her half-a-dozen pupils. But do you not remember how Mrs. Clifton

told us her daughter's music mistress was going to be married to some one in the country, and that she wanted some one in her place. Now, there are four girls there. Jane, could you not go round to Russell-square before the church-meeting to-night? and if Mrs. Clifton wished it, Miss Torrington might go herself to-morrow morning. My cousin says you are a first-rate pianist, my dear; and that he can recommend you, even to advanced pupils. Your voice, he tells us, is something wonderful. I wish we had a piano!"

Jane thought the idea a good one. She would set out for this "church-meeting," whatever it might be, a quarter of an hour earlier than usual; she could slip round very quickly, she said, and get to church by way of Montague-place and Charlotte-street, and then she had only to cross the road—which road I soon found out, was Oxford-street. "I suppose you will stay at home this evening, mother?" she continued; "that is, if you will not go yourself, and let me stop."

"Yes, my dear, I shall stay, and help this young lady to unpack. Sarah can mind the shop very well, for we have so few customers after dark."

"I have not much time to lose," said Jane, rising from the table; "there is Mrs. Riley's order to attend to, and that package of new goods to sort, before I can set out. I cannot bear being late on week-days any more than Sundays. And I must be up betimes to-morrow morning, for the Miss Sandilands have sent in such a quantity of wools to match. They wanted them to-night, but the light failed me, and they are so particular; so I promised to send them round by ten o'clock to-morrow morning. And, oh, mother! one of us must go to De la Rue's to-morrow. Those last goods were a mistake—not at all the articles we wanted; and the people in Taviton-street are waiting for them. And you will see that Robert takes that white fleecy wool to old Mrs. Bradford to-night, and the large pins, according to the number entered in the order-book. I hope you will excuse us, Miss Torrington; but business is business, you know, and it must be attended to; and ours, somehow, takes a great deal of talking about. We

have some very pretty things in the shop—all kinds of fancy articles. 'The sweetest things,' as our young lady customers tell us sometimes. So when you are dull you must just come and look at our knick-knackeries and curiosities. But now I must go, indeed."

When she had disappeared, I could not help asking what kind of meeting or service it was that Miss Jane was going to; and Mrs. Brown explained, with a little wonder, I fancied, at my ignorance: she had been going to church-meetings for nearly forty years; and to find any one totally in the dark respecting their object and nature was to her a startling experience. But she had scarcely spoken half-a-dozen sentences before I made the happy discovery that she was a Christian woman; and it mattered not that she worshipped in a mode to which I was unaccustomed: I felt instinctively that we should agree, for there was nothing of the bigot in her, and I was struck there and then with the largeness of her views, and the utter absence of anything approaching to sectarianism.

"So you see, my dear," she said, in conclusion, "it is, after all, only *one Church!* We have one faith, one Lord, one baptism, though we differ on many outward matters. Some people rave a great deal about *unity*, by which they really mean uniformity. Now, this is very foolish and hurtful. The good Lord Himself never meant us to force our minds all into one mould, or He would not have given us diversities of gifts, and feelings, and temperaments. It is just as senseless to say all the world should eat one particular kind of food, as that all Christians should follow one rule of worship. I think in the present day people talk a great deal about what they don't understand, and they take great liberties with the Spirit of God. It's just simple faith in Jesus Christ, my dear, that we want; it is just being 'in Him,' and He in us; it is just living to His glory, because His love constrains us, that makes us heirs of the kingdom: and then I care not whether a man chants his prayers in St. Paul's Cathedral yonder, or whether he shouts them in bad English in a Ranter's meeting-

house, though to *me* it seems the right and the best way to go between; for I like all things pertaining to religion to be done decently and in order."

"But still, Mrs. Brown, there should be union among Christians."

"Undoubtedly, my dear. And, thank God, there is a great deal of union among them—more than the world outside knows of. But in their zeal for unity, many people forget charity; and by unity they mean too often *uniformity*, which God does not require, and which man can never bear. The danger is, that while we are trying so hard to establish things doubtful and non-essential, building up our own particular *ism*—whether we give our opinions a distinctive name or not—we should let go our hold on Christ; and it is for His glory, and not for any pet ideas of our own, even if we think we find them in the Bible, that we should be *chiefly* concerned!"

All this was quite new to me; and I was quite startled to find at the very outset of my Christian course, conflicting elements among believers. I made no reply; for I could not be quite certain that I agreed with all that Mrs. Brown had said, and I wished to know more upon the subject before I talked about it. Still, I saw that she was right in speaking of all churches as mere sections of the great and universal Church of Christ; that it was impossible that men could agree on every point, but that it was necessary that all should be united to Christ, and so in Him to one another—in spirit, though not always in outward seeming.

Presently Miss Jane came home: she had seen Mrs. Clifton, and I was to call in Russell-square at noon next day.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

SETTLING TO WORK.

THE next morning I presented myself with a beating heart to Mrs. Clifton, of Russell-square. Mrs. Brown and Jane

were extremely anxious that I should come to terms with this lady, since four pupils were certainly a consideration at the outset of my career; and if the girls and their mamma "took to me," there was no saying how widely they might serve me. The letters of recommendation which kind Mr. Scott had promised had arrived by the morning's post. My chief reference was to be to Messrs. Piccolo and Grand, who were great people in the musical world, and always ready to oblige my old Cotswoldbury master.

I gave my name to the stylish footman who answered to my ring, and told him that I had come by appointment. He surveyed me from head to foot with cool impertinence, after the manner of his species; and then, with a patronising air, showed me into a little waiting-room on one side of the hall. I felt very much like a servant "come about this place," and for a minute all the pride of the Torringtons was up in arms, and I resolved to manifest a proper spirit of independency, and show that I would permit no liberties in the shape of condescensions or needless interrogations.

The next minute, however, my head was bowed in humiliation of another kind. Was this my thankfulness, my gratitude, to my heavenly Father, whose tender care had brought me so far on my dangerous voyage? Was this the filial submission for which I had prayed so earnestly? the simple child-like faith which should take joyfully all things manifestly "*ordered?*" I had committed my way to the Lord, and now I was inclined to quarrel with Him, because the way seemed not so smooth as I could wish it. And last night I had been so content, so happy, in the rest my soul had found, that I thought nothing could move me—nothing disturb the peace that filled my heart with so deep and full a sense that all at last "*was well.*" And now I was giving way to sinful pride, and to emotions petty as they were wrong. Truly, I was ashamed of myself, and disappointed too!

The truth is, I was like most young, untried believers—I fancied the wheat was in the full ear as soon as the blade was peeping from the ground. I put out my hand to reach

the crown while the cross was being fitted to my shoulder. I thought I had just attained the heights of Pisgah, while as yet I had to climb the hill Difficulty, and to cross the valley of Humiliation, perhaps even that darker, colder valley on which rests the shadow of death; though not the infinite calm and the perfect joy of death itself, when its solemn gates are really the portals to eternal bliss! I was constrained to prayer, my heart was attuned to praise, I could lay hold on the promises, my faith was strong, my hope full of glory: but I was not prepared for the ceaseless conflict by the way; for the daily and hourly watchfulness, which must go with faith and prayer; for the need there was for the incessant cry, "Lead me not into temptation—deliver me from evil."

A minute or two afterwards I heard voices on the stairs. "A young person to see me, do you say, Jopson? Is it the dressmaker from Madame's?"

I did not hear Jopson answer, though I could distinguish Mrs. Brown's name, and that seemed to clear up all difficulties. A few more words, and I was requested to walk up into the drawing-room.

There I found Mrs. Clifton, a widow lady, still handsome and young-looking, and with her two eldest daughters—pretty, graceful girls, who, I thought, might be amiable enough as pupils. The elder of the two might be about sixteen years of age. As for the mother, she was cold and grave and even stern; her stateliness, which was evidently quite natural, was tinctured with hauteur, and she asked questions in a hard voice, and with a most uncompromising expression of countenance. She asked so many questions, that I thought she must have been nourished in her youth upon catechisms generally, and some of the questions it seemed to me were remarkably irrelevant, particularly as I was not thinking of residing under her roof.

Nevertheless I kept my patience, and answered her with all due deference; though it was not quite easy to give her all the information she desired. But at length she requested me to sit down to the pianoforte, and give her an idea of my

"touch and style." Then I knew I was upon safe ground; I was not afraid of disappointing her expectations.

I played several pieces, and, lastly, one of my own "reveries," which she informed me she liked the best of all. Then I sang "The Peri Pardoned," a favourite old song of her own, which happened to be lying uppermost in the canterbury drawer; then a German ballad, and then one of the solos from the oratorio of "St. Paul:" and Mrs. Clifton, with the muscles of her face visibly relaxed, declared herself quite satisfied; and nothing remained but to settle the terms and the hours of attendance. Finally, I agreed to spend two mornings in every week in instructing the four Misses Clifton in music and singing, for a consideration of £20 a year and my luncheon, which would of course serve me for my dinner. And if the young ladies made progress Mrs. Clifton graciously assured me she would recommend me to all her friends, and no doubt my time would soon be fully occupied.

Thankfully I acceded to these arrangements; £20 a year of my very own seemed quite a grand beginning. Oh! if I could only get the interest of my own £400! But that was out of the question; for to make any stir about it would be to reveal my whereabouts to the Croftons, and perhaps also to Gilbert. I really thought, by dint of hard economy, I could live on £40 a year, though certainly when I had paid Mrs. Brown her due, little more than *three pounds* per annum would remain for dress, laundress, and incidental expenses, to say nothing of piano hire, which seemed really necessary. But then I had not £40—only half that sum in prospect; so it behoved me to supplement my little income as speedily as possible. The Browns were delighted with my success, and thought I had made an excellent commencement.

And so, indeed, I had; for how many persons in my position came to London seeking employment, which they never found! How many were cast adrift on the great sea of London life, and, after vain and weary buffetings with the winds and waves of friendlessness and disappointment, sank

down at last to reappear no more! But God was very merciful to me; and when my spirit was overwhelmed within me, He knew my path and led me to the rock that was higher than I.

The next day I went to see Messrs. Piccolo and Grand, and I met with a very flattering reception; "they were happy to be of use to any friend of Mr. Scott's," &c. But when I had displayed my abilities Mr. Grand, who was really the managing man, told me that I might count upon his assistance in any engagement I might wish to form, and, indeed, he thought he could procure me what I wished without any loss of time. Had I any talent for acting? Yes, I believed I had; but what then? Three days ago had any respectable theatrical manager offered me a place in his company, I should unhesitatingly have accepted it. I had even contemplated such a life, and wondered whether stage disguises would preserve me from unwelcome recognition should the Druces or my cousin Fanny chance to be in the boxes. And I had also decided upon the name which I would take as a public character; for I thought I had no right to put the honoured name of Torrington on play-bills or operatic programmes, neither could I myself have endured to see it in such propinquities.

But now all thoughts of such a career were put aside at once; it needed not the least consideration; I felt straightway that I could not serve God and the world. My place as a Christian, was not upon the stage. There would be no harm in singing in public, I knew; but how could I tell what I might be called upon to sing? What companionship could I ensure? what life but one of glare, and vanity, and excitement could I expect? And this taking the very fairest view of the profession. I could not place myself in such a position and then kneel down and say, "Lead me not into temptation." As well might I put my hand into the fire and pray that it might not be burnt. If the fire came to me, I might indeed have faith, and call upon the Lord, and trust to be delivered, as were His servants of old; but if I voluntarily and rashly sought the flame and cast myself into it,

what could I expect but destruction, or, at the best, terrible anguish and life-long wounds and scars?

So I firmly declined the proposal which was to be made to me through Mr. Grand; and to prevent all future inconvenience from similar causes, I said plainly that I disapproved of theatrical entertainments, and could not conscientiously take part in them. Mr. Grand seemed surprised —as, indeed he had reason to be—for, as I afterwards discovered, Mr. Scott had told him that my powers were far too admirable to be wasted in mere lesson-giving; that I only required a very little instruction to come out as an operatic star; and that any one who chose to "produce" me might do so with honour and profit to himself, as well as to my own advantage. And Mr. Grand was quite prepared to take me by the hand, and place me where many aspire to be, and where very few attain to. And he launched out again in praise of my voice, and the cultivation already bestowed upon it. He spoke of the position I might make my own, of the brilliancy of the success I might ensure, of the fortune I might accumulate, and even of the splendid alliance I might achieve, since "there was nothing that youth, beauty, and talent might not command."

I smiled, and said that, even apart from religious convictions, I should prefer a retired life; I had no yearnings after the brilliant future he had so vividly portrayed; I only wished to earn my bread honestly and quietly, by the exercise of the gift which God had bestowed upon me; and in my position, and with my views, it seemed to me that I could but do so by giving lessons.

"No doubt," was Mr. Grand's reply; "but I so completely understood Mr. Scott to say that you really desired an engagement of the nature I proposed, that I instantly entered into communication with certain persons, and I found that if you were indeed all that our old friend declared you to be, there would not be the least difficulty in obtaining for you a lucrative appointment very speedily. You are *quite* sure that you decline to negotiate."

"Quite; though I thank you and Mr. Scott very heartily.

The truth is, Mr. Grand, that I felt very differently on this subject several days ago: my views are changed; and I cannot, dare not, enter upon a life so fraught with temptation."

"My dear young lady, there are actresses and *prima donnas* as virtuous and high-minded as any lady of the land. You, I am sure, have dignity enough to hold your own and to repel impertinences."

"I dare say I have, but I was not thinking of that kind of thing. It is just this, Mr. Grand; I am determined, by God's grace, to live a Christian life, and therefore I must have a Christian calling—my work must be such as I can ask God to bless. If I accepted your proposition, I am not sure that I *could* do this. Such a situation might not hurt some people, but I am sure it would do me harm—it would make me vain, imperious, worldly."

"Really, for so young a lady you have singular ideas, Miss Torrington. Let me say to you, in all kindness, that they will stand very much in the way of your advancement."

"That is not for me to consider. If I see my way I must walk in it, whithersoever it may lead me." And as I spoke there flashed again across my mind Gilbert's favourite text, "So He bringeth them unto their desired haven." And I knew that if in simple dependence on God's own Word I followed that which He had shown to me to be the right path, I should in His good time come to a joyful ending. For now I had given up the idea of the earthly haven of rest I had pictured to myself so fairly; but I looked for a more enduring haven, far off perhaps yet, but growing nearer and nearer every hour, as my little bark went on her way across the stormy sea to the port of heaven. Then Mr. Grand mentioned the terms on which I might be engaged even now; and of course they were far beyond anything I could earn by teaching, at least for the present; whilst the actual work would involve much less toil, and patience, and perseverance.

I told Mrs. Brown that evening all that had transpired between myself and Mr. Grand, and she highly approved of

my decision, and encouraged me to hope and wait for thorough success in the obscure but satisfactory path I had chosen. And I had not long to wait for the first signs of prosperity, for two other pupils in the neighbourhood very soon presented themselves; and Mr. Grand, disappointed though he was, good man, mentioned my name to such purpose that in a month after my arrival I had four clever and well-paying pupils from his recommendation, and my reputation as a teacher of music and singing was established.

And now I began to settle down in a regular routine. Every morning brought its work, and every evening came the rest I needed. The days fleeted by, week succeeded week, and Christmas came at last to give me, as Mrs. Brown said, the holiday I so thoroughly deserved. But that Christmas-time was very dreary to me. Of Mrs. Brown's motherly kindness, and of the pleasant intercourse I had with Jane, I can never say enough: but still they were to me half strangers; they knew nothing of my former life, nothing of the terrible ordeal I had passed through. Jane, I think, guessed something; but there was no one to whom I could speak of the past, no one to whom I could tell the loneliness and bitterness of my position; and there were times when I was weak enough to regret the sacrifice I had made—to wish—oh! how ardently;—I had seen Gilbert once more after my interview with Mr. Saunderson. Might we not have worked together, and have secured a competency for the old people, and for Alice? We should have been content ourselves with very little. Had I *really* acted for the best when I resolved to sever the tie between myself and the only man I could ever love? Would he be happy *now*, as Mr. Saunderson's heir? would he think the wealth, and honours, and the luxuries he might command now that I was no longer a stumbling-block in his way, worth having—worth the price he had to pay for them? And, above all things, what did he think of me? in what light did he view my elopement? for I knew not what else to call it. How had matters been represented to him? Perhaps, while I was breaking my heart

over the necessary pain of entire separation, he was reproaching me for faithlessness, fickleness, even cruelty? And perhaps I had been cruel—I could not tell; I did not know how much suffering I had caused him, but I did know that Gilbert Tredgold was not one to love lightly—that where he had once fixed his affections they would probably remain through life. Oh! should I ever see him again? should I ever be able to explain to him *why* I had flown from him immediately after I had confessed my love for him, and had promised to be his? Would the obstacles to our union ever be removed? Might I hope that in time to come we might meet again, and renew the vows we made each other on the cliff at Cleeve?

I could only think and think till I was weary. And weeks and months rolled on, and I never heard of Gilbert Tredgold; though I knew from Mr. Scott that my uncle's family had returned to Cotswoldbury, and that it was commonly reported that I had behaved very ill to my relations, and was gone out as a governess, the breach between us being such as to prevent our ever living together under the same roof. Again, it was also believed that I had jilted my cousin Tom; and I feared that other unjust conclusions were formed against me which Mr. Scott would not pain me by relating. Of Mr. Saunderson or Gilbert he never spoke —indeed, I question if he knew them at all; so that, on the point I most ardently desired to be informed, I was still entirely in the dark.

Sometimes I thought I would write to Mirrie; then I felt that would be to undo all I had done; for, if she knew my address, the Tredgolds would certainly know it too. But bitterly I deplored my unkind behaviour to her in the past now. I was desolate myself, and yearned for love and sympathy, which I could not have. Ah, Mirrie! gentle Mirrie! you were well avenged; for now I, too, stood alone, without a kindred tie, and I had little hope of better days to come.

So I plodded on through that long, dismal winter, and I grew used to London life—to its bustle and noises and its

thronged resorts; and I had my regular duties, my pupils all the day, and my practice in the evening! for now I felt justified in hiring a piano for my own use, and Messrs. Piccolo and Grand sent me a good one, on very advantageous terms, and I kept up my music much to my own benefit and to the delight of Mrs. Brown and Jane, who were never tired of hearing me perform. And the more I knew of my kind hostess the more I esteemed and loved her; and Jane and I learned to call each other by our Christian names, and we grew to be real friends, though of the one great sorrow of my life I never spoke to her; and our little household was a happy one, for we were all of one mind, and we took sweet counsel together, and walked to the house of God in company. And I felt, amid much sadness and pain of mind, how good my heavenly Father had been and still was to me, in casting my lot in such pleasant places. Should I not trust Him for all that was to come?

And the fogs and snows of winter disappeared, and the March winds swept through the squares and whirled me round the corners as I went about my business; then came the showers and sunshine of sweet April, and I began to long, with a longing I could not repress, for the breezy Woldscote Hills, and the lanes where I had rambled with dear Gussie, even for the Promenade that would so soon be bursting into its full vernal splendour. To Gussie I trusted, more than to any human creature, to preserve my character from injurious reports. I knew that she divined the truth, and I knew she had firm faith in me and would at once acquit me of my real impropriety of conduct, whoever might be the accuser. And she was such a spirited little thing that I was sure she would never keep silence if any scandal against me were uttered in her presence. Above all, I fancied she would try to comfort Gilbert, and to confirm his trust in me.

And May came in, andthe London season was getting to its height, and everything was gay, and fair, and sunshiny; and seven months had elapsed since I had settled myself

down in King-street, and it seemed as if seven years might roll on in the same quiet, plodding duties, the same vain yearnings, the same striving for patience, and the same great void, which had filled my heart ever since that last miserable morning at Cleeve-super-Mare.

CHAPTER XXXIX.

THE GUARDIAN.

THE bright midsummer days were at their longest when, through the kindness of Messrs. Piccolo and Grand, I was enabled to form a new and very advantageous engagement. Two Miss Brewsters, girls of my own age or thereabouts, came up to town that year for their first season. They were country-bred, and not at all accomplished, and, if a rich relative had not died childless and intestate, they would doubtless have remained in the seclusion of their own village, and have married respectably among the squirearchy or clergy of their neighbourhood. But girls with £30,000 are rarely doomed to "blush unseen," and they may, if they like, "shed their sweetness" on Belgravian air, especially if they are pretty generally presentable, and not encumbered with vulgar relatives.

Harriet and Charlotte Brewster were orphans, and they had been brought up by an aunt, the widow of a physician, who had given them an excellent plain education, and fitted them admirably for the sphere in which they seemed destined to remain through life. But access of fortune brought access of friends, and the mode of life that suited young ladies with only very moderate expectations was not precisely that which co-heiresses with brilliant prospects might choose for themselves. The result of it all was that, when their year of mourning for their cousin had expired, they came up to town, still chaperoned by their aunt, Mrs. Elicott, and very speedily discovered that they laboured under manifold disadvantages which it would be as well to

remedy as speedily as possible. One of the first things they endeavoured to improve was their music, their performance, both instrumental and vocal, being in thoroughly bad style; and in due course of time it came to pass that I was recommended and finally installed as their instructor.

They took to me amazingly; indeed, their friendship became at times almost a burden, chiefly because I had so little leisure at command that the claims they made on it, after and before my lessons were given, seriously inconvenienced me. They were most amiable girls, quite unharmed, it would seem, by the changes which wealth had wrought in their position. They told me all the simple story of their childhood, and their school-days, and they confided to me some of their visions and aspirations for the future. They asked my advice on many subjects unconnected with their musical education; for they had somehow received the impression that I had had large experiences of the world, and of woman's life therein; and they would have had me go out with them and join their parties at home far oftener than would have been prudent in my situation. Still, we became very intimate, and my intercourse with these kind, true-hearted girls, was certainly of great service to me, and roused me from the depressing torpor into which I had been falling at the commencement of the summer.

About the middle of July, being tired of the heat and dust of Portland Place, they resolved to spend a few weeks at the coast, and they earnestly importuned me to accompany them. I really needed a change, and nearly all my pupils were out of town; so, after taking Mrs. Brown's advice, I accepted the invitation as frankly as it was given, though for a fortnight only, on account of the importance of resuming my duties at the proper period.

We had been at Bayscliff more than a week, and I was thinking with a little sadness of my speedy return to Bloomsbury, when Charlotte Brewster came in one morning with an open letter in her hand, and a dissatisfied air upon her face, exclaiming, "It is such a bore, Margaret; our guardian will be here this evening. I knew he would join us during

our stay at Bayscliff, but I did not anticipate so early an arrival."

"Is he very disagreeable?"

"No. For an elderly bachelor, and a guardian into the bargain, he is rather *nice!* But I do not want him now, because, in common courtesy, we must give him due attention; and he will interfere with our arrangements, and you are going back to town so soon. We wanted to have you all to ourselves while you remained. I hope he will like you."

"Is he difficult to please?"

"I should say he is, but really I know very little of him; he has only been our guardian since we became wealthy damsels. We had about £300 a-year between us before all this money came, and auntie was our sole guardian; but when £60,000 came to be divided between us, it was declared to be necessary that we should have some masculine protector, who would take us and our fortunes under his kind care. Auntie was quite of this opinion, and after reference to our cousin's papers, it was decided that this Mr. King, who was his chief friend, and a connection by marriage, should assume a certain authority over us and our affairs till we were of age. I have only seen him twice; and he was very kind, but a little stiff—a little of an old *beau*, with the manners, I should think, of the court of George III. Yet, strange to say, he has been living in America for the last ten years; one would have thought his precise and antiquated style would have been rubbed away in that democratic country; but he seems, as far as I can judge, to have lost none of the original starch of his composition. But don't let me prejudice you against him, Margaret: goodness is goodness all the world over, whether its style be free or starchy; and our guardian is emphatically *good*."

"I wonder a man such as you describe should care to live so long in America."

"Oh! it was duty took him there; and duty kept him there, no doubt; he is a man who would sacrifice anything for the right. He was going to be married once, long ago;

and the lady deserted him for some other lover, and she and her husband went out to seek their fortunes on the other side of the Atlantic. By-and-by came news that she was a widow, and left with several children in extreme poverty, and Mr. King, still faithful to his first love, went out, as people naturally imagined, to marry her if she would have him. However, they were not married;—the poor woman was in very failing health, and could not, as she wished, return to England; her medical attendants told her, if she attempted the voyage, she would never live to see the land. So our guardian stayed on there, and comforted her till her death, which happened four years after his arrival in America. There was property to which the children had a lawful claim, and he promised her to remain in the country till their rights should be established; and remain he did, through a very tedious and complicated law process, which, however, was successful in the end. Before he came away, he saw both the daughters happily married, and the only son comfortably settled as partner in a good commercial house. I think, having been attending to other people's affairs so long, he found himself quite out of employment when his American children, as he calls them, needed him no longer, and he was rather pleased when it was proposed to him that we should be his wards."

"Has he no real relations of his own?"

"I should say not, though I know too little of him to be certain. He had a sister though, about whom there is a melancholy story. She went out to India, I think, and died there—was drowned, I believe, and her only child with her. She had married against the will of her parents, and was never forgiven, I am afraid. Altogether her history is a warning to young ladies who are inclined to self-will and disobedience."

"Went out to India, do you say? I wonder if—but no, it cannot be!"

"What do you wonder? What cannot it be? How strange you look, Margaret!"

"Something very strange once happened in our village:

a ship was wrecked, and a lady formerly from India drowned; she was coming back to look for her brother, a Mr. King; and she, too, married in defiance of her relatives. I could not help wondering whether there was any connection between poor Mrs. Downing and your guardian!"

"Was that the lady's name? And was her child drowned with her?"

"No; but she narrowly escaped. She was taken from her mother's arms apparently lifeless, and restored chiefly through the care of my own dear mother. And this little girl, Miriam Downing, lived with us till our household was broken up, after the death of both my parents. My father and mother took the orphan child that Providence had committed to them, and treated her as another daughter. Afterwards, when I had to leave home, some good ladies, who kept a school in the adjoining town, adopted her with a view to educating her as their assistant and probable successor. She is still with them, for all I know to the contrary."

"How old is this child?"

"She must be about sixteen now. She was just ten when she came to us."

"Were no efforts made to discover this uncle—this Mr. King you spoke of?"

"Of course. My father did all he could to find out Miriam's relatives; but nothing ever resulted from his inquiries. Miriam herself knew nothing about this uncle, except that he had been very angry with her mamma, she scarcely understood for what. She therefore very naturally shrank from being given over to him; and I am sure she was very glad when the search was over, and she was told that she must make up her mind to remain with us. She always spoke of the missing Mr. King as Uncle Cuthbert."

"There!" cried Charlotte, eagerly; "that settles it, I think. Our guardian's name is *Cuthbert*—he must be the long-lost uncle, and your little friend must be the niece he believed was drowned five years ago with her mother."

Of course I felt very much excited, and very anxious to

meet Mr. King. What a strange story I should have to tell him! and would he be pleased with the discovery thus made? No wonder we failed to find him when he was so far away as America. I could scarcely doubt that he and Mirrie's uncle were one person, the Christian name being similar, and at the same time so uncommon.

Late in the afternoon the two girls drove to the station, while I waited with no small anxiety to see this "Uncle Cuthbert," who had suddenly become so interesting to me; and the time lagged strangely that evening, as I strolled alone upon the shore, and watched the rising and falling of the tide, till the shadows fell, and the stars came out in the clear nightfall sky. I paced up and down the strip of land that lay below the shingle immediately in front of the cottage, straining my eyes through the gathering gloom to note any dark speck upon the long white Lyncombe road, and listening with a feverish impatience for the sound of wheels.

And how often I was disappointed! Wheels, indeed, I heard, but not the wheels I watched for! Now it was the carrier, who, in the season, travelled almost daily between Lyncombe and Bayscliff; now it was the butcher, bringing home, in his ugly cart, three innocent lambs destined to the knife; now it was a large party who had gone out that morning pic-nicing to Earlsmouth Abbey, and were returning, all gaiety and laughter, to finish up the evening with an *impromptu* ball at the Hotel. But at last a carriage stopped before the garden gate, and I heard the voices of Charlotte and Harriet; and I could just perceive a manly figure, and I knew that Mr. Cuthbert King was come.

I did not go in till they were all busy round the tea-table, and had begun to wonder where I was; and then, of course, I was introduced to Mr. King; and I started as I met his gaze; for there were Mirrie's own blue eyes, and the exact transcript of her features, though the naturally fair complexion was bronzed, and the curling auburn hair was almost silvery white. I could not doubt that Cuthbert King and Mrs. Downing were brother and sister.

"We have not said a word yet," whispered Harriet to me, when tea was over, and there was a little bustle in the room. "We only told him we had brought down a friend with us, of whom we were very fond, and that she played and sang exquisitely, and that he must like her very much. And he promised that he would if he could. He is in the most charming of tempers. I begin to think he will be an acquisition instead of an incumbrance.

"Probably! But had I better say anything to-night, or shall we wait for the *dénouement* till to-morrow?"

"Oh, let us have it over to-night! I shall not sleep till I know whether our suspicions are correct. Nobody is thinking of going to bed yet. One of us will lead the way to the subject presently."

Accordingly, Harriet was as good as her word; for she began telling the old gentleman—though, by the way, he was scarcely sixty—how learned I was in sea-shore botany and zoology, and how I could explain all about ships and their rigging, and knew which was the jib-boom, and all about sky-scrapers, and moon-rakers and masts—she even believed I had once made a voyage in the "Flying Dutchman!"

I hastened to disclaim such remarkable nautical experiences; but said that I had been brought up on the coast, and that my father was a most accomplished naturalist, and consequently I learned much from him in my childhood.

"But she quite understands navigation," cried Charlotte, "she can steer admirably. You should have heard her yesterday abusing Jem, the boatman's son, for running us aground. And you should have seen how she took the helm and starboarded and larboarded it, till we were in deep water again."

"I might have starboarded and larboarded, as you call it, in vain," I said, laughingly, "if the tide had not been rising; and really that Jem is an uncommonly stupid boy, and will get his boat into trouble some day."

"Were you ever wrecked yourself?" asked Harriet.

"Something like it," I answered, thinking of that memo-

rable night when the "Little Gipsy" struck on the Tor Reef, and went down in troubled waters. "The boat I was in—it was a small fishing vessel—went to pieces in the storm, and I and my companions were saved by scrambling on to an island rock that was mercifully close at hand when the leak occurred. It was a terrible night; and an hour or two afterwards a great ship was wrecked close to our shores. I shall never forget it."

"Where did the ship come from?"

"From Marseilles, or, rather, from Port St. Louis—she had only called at Marseilles, I believe, and taken in cargo and passengers. She was called the 'Hirondelle.' It was from that wreck that little Miriam was saved."

"Ah! yes," interposed Charlotte. "You should tell Mr. King all about that, because the little girl's name is the same as his sister's, and she too was drowned at sea. Your sister was Mrs. Downing; was she not, Mr. King?"

"Yes!" said that gentleman, rousing himself from a reverie into which he had fallen, "yes, her name was Mary Downing, and she had one little girl; they both perished on the homeward voyage. I could never learn particulars. How long ago did you say, Miss Torrington?"

"Five years this very month; and Mrs. Downing's name was *Mary*, I know. She was a Miss King; very fair, golden-haired, and blue-eyed; and she married against the wishes of her parents, and went out, first to India, and afterwards to the Mauritius, where her husband, an officer, died. Afterwards she lived in France with her little daughter; but, finding her health give way, she determined to come to England, and look for her only brother, who was once, I believe, passionately fond of her. Miriam always speaks of him as Uncle Cuthbert!"

All the while I was speaking, Mr. King was changing countenance—now flushed, now pale; and lips and eyelids were quivering with excitement. His voice was low and husky when he gasped out, "Miss Torrington, that must have been my sister—my poor Mary—whom I have yearned so often to take into my arms again, and beg her

to forgive me. I was nearly twenty years older than she, and she was my darling; and I was very cruel to her about her marriage. She was wrong, doubtless; disobedience is always wrong, and brings its own punishment; but I had no right to act as I did. Bitterly, bitterly have I repented the intemperance of my anger. And there was nothing to object to in Captain Downing, except his comparative poverty. He was a gentleman in every respect, and he and Mary were devotedly attached; but we were a rich family, and proud of our wealth; and, fools that we were, we thought that money ought to marry money—as if gold and silver were all one had to care for in this life. I made inquiries at 'Lloyd's,' but I could never learn anything authentic respecting the fate of the vessel. It was said—only I was in America at the time—that all on board perished."

"That was not true, though many were lost. But part of the crew and two of the passengers were saved—one an elderly gentleman, a rich merchant of Southam, and the other the little girl named Miriam Downing, who must, of course, be your niece if her mother really were your sister Mary."

"Miss Torrington, you have brought me the most blessed tidings I could have received. But does the child still live? And how has she been supported?"

I told him the whole history; how I had seen her mother serenely beautiful in death, how I had found the little orphan in my own mother's arms, how she had lived with us for fifteen months, how we had gone to school together, and how wickedly jealous I had been of the kindness shown to her and the love she won from every one about her. It was quite a relief to make this confession, though it pertained only to childish things gone by.

Finally, Mr. King took down the address of the Misses Everitt, and signified his intention of proceeding at once to St. Eldred's to claim his niece and adopt her as his own. At last, then, I had been the means of bringing good to Miriam Downing.

Two or three days afterwards Mr. King set out upon his journey to my old home-country; but I first obtained a promise from him that he would not mention my name to any one at St. Eldred's, that he would not explain even to Mirrie how he came to hear of her abode there till he had brought her safe away. I could only tell him that I wished to remain unknown, and that, I believed, as a matter of duty.

He assured me that my wishes should be respected, and concluded by saying, "But some time or other, Miss Torrington, you must tell me more about yourself. You are very young to be quite alone in the world, and if you can trust a man old enough to be your grandfather, and if I can be of any use to you, it will give me unfeigned pleasure. I have most entire confidence in the purity of your motives, but I doubt your judgment a little. The question arises, 'Is *mystery* ever necessary, ever prudent?' But till I return, till I see you again, you may count on my discretion. I owe you so much, Miss Torrington, that I would willingly be your friend and helper if you will let me."

CHAPTER XL.

MIRRIE'S TIDINGS.

I WENT back to King-street at the appointed time, and was soon deeply immersed in my professional duties. Indeed, I was busier than ever; for all my pupils resumed their lessons in the course of the next few weeks, and I was able to form several new and profitable engagements, which so entirely filled up my leisure that I was under the necessity of refusing several pupils who were offered me towards the end of the autumn.

Mr. King brought his niece to town in triumph; and, till some alterations were effected in his own establishment, he left her with his wards and Mrs. Elicott in Portland-place: so, once again, after a separation of four years, I met

Miriam Downing. At first I thought her little altered ; but soon I discovered that she was no longer the child I took her for. Perhaps she had never been so much of a baby as she seemed to me ; for I had been used to take things very much for granted, and, because she was so gentle and yielding, and so little troubled about the future, I had judged her to be as infantile in mind as in appearance. Still small in stature and slight in figure, and still exquisitively lovely, with the radiant bloom upon her cheek, and the golden ringlets undarkened, and the deep blue eyes as sweet and frank as ever, there was a change in her which spoke of womanly thought and feeling beyond her years;—for she was not much more than fifteen after all—an age at which anything like maturity of mind is as unfrequent as it is undesirable.

I found that the Misses Everitt were broken-hearted at parting from her, and that she was deeply grieved to leave them, even for the kinsman whom she loved and reverenced as her own dear mother's brother. "They were so very good and kind," she said to me, struggling with her tears, as she ended the recital of her simple, happy adventures at Hawthorn House ; "they made me call them aunt ; and if I had been their child, they could not have been more loving, more considerate. Next to your dear mother, Margaret, I must ever regard them as my best and most beloved friends. It has only been lately that I have fully realized what my position was when I was saved from the wreck of the 'Hirondelle;' only lately that I have quite appreciated the goodness of those who took care of me,—a poor penniless orphan, a literal waif and stray, cast up from the actual sea as well as from the ocean of life! When I think how God provided for me—first of all by sending me to Kelver House, and then by making the Misses Everitt take an interest in me, and now by restoring me to family ties again—I am lost in wonder and deep thankfulness. But here I am, Margaret, talking all about myself; and I want to know how it is you are here in London? I am afraid your relations at Cotswoldbury were not very kind to you. I could not like that

Mr. Crofton; perhaps it was mere childishness, but he always frightened me. And then your letters did not give me the idea that you were happy or even comfortable. But tell me all about yourself, Margaret."

"There is little to tell, Mirrie. No; I am wrong in saying so; my story is by no means as uneventful as your own, but I cannot talk about it. I was not happy at Cotswoldbury, and it seemed right—nay, all things considered, I am sure it was right—that I should leave them, and depend upon myself."

"Poor Margaret! I always felt—indeed, I *knew*—they were not kind to you."

"Looking back quite dispassionately upon the past, I feel that they really were *not* kind; though there were grave faults on my side, and I have to thank them for very substantial benefits. I owe much to my Aunt and Uncle Crofton; especially the musical education which enables me now to earn a respectable livelihood. I cannot explain to you why I wish them to remain ignorant of my address; you must trust me, Mirrie, and give me credit for sufficient reasons."

"Of course I do; but, Margaret, it is only fair to tell you that I know something—I know how unpleasantly you were situated with your Cousin Tom."

"Who can have told you, Mirrie?" I asked in great astonishment.

"Gilbert Tredgold told me. He came down to St. Eldred's very soon after you left Cleeve-super-Mare. I only saw him once to speak to him during his stay, because the Misses Everitt very naturally objected to his calling at Hawthorn House—you know they have most rigid ideas of decorum, and they are perfect duennas to their pupils; but that once, Margaret, we had a fine long talk, and you were our principal subject of discourse. I was so glad to hear about you from some one who had actually been in your company, and knew exactly how you were situated."

"What did Gilbert Tredgold tell you?"

"He told me how they—the Croftons—had been endeavouring to force you into a marriage with this Cousin

Tom, who seems to be a very black sheep indeed, even in his parents' eyes. But about your sudden withdrawal there seems to be some mystery. They had tried to make Gilbert believe you were gone to France; but somehow he felt incredulous on that point. He said he had not the smallest idea where to find you, and I think he came to me hoping to obtain some clue. He went also to Susan Pratten; but she was as ignorant as I."

"He did wish to find me then?"

"To be sure he did! Poor Gilbert! How strange it is, Margaret, that the very things which seem to us at first such rare good fortune should so often turn out to be the chief cause of pain and disappointment!"

"Yes. But do you make that remark in connection with Gilbert Tredgold?"

"Of course I do. I was referring to what people called his 'good luck'—his adoption by Mr. Saunderson. It has given him the education he desired, I suppose; but then the situation must have been one of great difficulty and irksome restraint, almost amounting to subjection. Also the life he led so long, surrounded by all the appliances of wealth, must have tended to unfit him for the career of hard toil which, after all, has proved to be his lot."

"What do you mean, Mirrie? Has Mr. Saunderson cast him off?"

"Yes; or he has cast himself off, I scarcely know which. He did not tell me the precise circumstances; but he said that Mr. Saunderson required that from him which he could not perform. There was a solemn promise to be given, or he was to go his way, and look for neither help nor countenance any more from the source which had so long afforded him both. I do not know what the required promise was, but it was one that Gilbert would not, and could not give. He only said that honour, duty, and feeling, alike forbade it, and no consideration could induce him to give way, though on any other point he would yield to Mr. Saunderson."

"Then, when you saw him at St. Eldred's, he was once more thrown upon his own resources?"

"Yes, I believe so. Happily the North Fort appointment could not be rescinded; so the old people are there still. But Bertha has left school, and Alice is very anxious to obtain needlework."

"Do you know what became of Gilbert after he left St. Eldred's?"

"He went to Southam, for he had friends there who liked him for his own sake, and not for the wealth it was supposed he would inherit—and very soon he got a berth as second mate in some vessel going out to China. Alice told me all about it. She did not clearly explain what had caused the rupture between her brother and his patron, but she thought he had acted rightly—'*quite* rightly,' she said with emphasis; 'though, of course, the sudden change in his prospects was a great blow to their father and mother. For herself, she would have been deeply grieved had he made the sacrifice desired by Mr. Saunderson.' It is about eight months, I should think, since Gilbert sailed. He was to come back in the spring; I believe they look for him at St. Eldred's early in March."

So, after all, I had suffered myself, and made him suffer in vain. I might have withdrawn myself quietly but openly from my uncle's family; I need not all this time have endured the misery of utter exile; I never need have run away to save Gilbert from misfortune! Why had it never crossed my mind that the affair might terminate thus; that he would refuse to accept the alternative proposed to him? But then I was not quite certain whether the quarrel had arisen out of his determination not to marry Sibyl, or because he would not consider our own engagement cancelled. How I longed for more definite information! But it was much to have heard actual tidings; and, selfish though it seemed, I could not but rejoice at his release from the bondage which I knew he felt severely. That he would make his own way in the world I never doubted: I had illimitable faith in his powers, and energy, and patience; and I knew that if God spared his life, he would succeed in whatever path he chose. Though a cloud of uncertainty still hung over my own

prospects, I felt greatly cheered and strengthened. Surely there were happy days in store for me; surely I had reason to thank God for the intelligence which had reached me after the long, dreary interval of utter silence and suspense. Now I felt a new vigour, a fresh impetus to work, a hope—it might be a wild one, but there it was, and I did not strive to banish it—that in due time Gilbert would return to claim me, and that some day, in the far distance yet, the fairy vision of that memorable evening at Cleeve would become reality.

Miriam and I were dear friends now; and after a while I told her how deeply I regretted the wicked jealousy and the cruel unkindness of other days. "But it all came back to me," I said one day. "I, too, knew what it was to be an orphan and alone in the world, and to meet with coldness and aversion where I hoped at least for toleration. All I made you endure, Mirrie, was visited upon me a hundredfold; for I had to bear not only neglect and indifference, but positive ill-treatment; for Sibyl oppressed me in many ways, and taunted me, and upbraided me with faults I had not committed, and even the servants were encouraged to treat me with disrespect."

"Oh, Margaret, dear, how hard it must have been! But, indeed, there is very little that I have to forgive, if forgiveness, as you say, is necessary to your peace. You were always really good to me; only I wanted more love than you could give. I was an exacting little creature, I believe, rather inclined to be morbid and fanciful."

"No, indeed! I never saw anything morbid about you."

"I gave you real cause for unhappiness, Miriam. You do not know how horribly jealous I used to be of every caress you received, of every attention paid to you. I could not bear *not to be first* in everybody's regard; that was the great secret of my naughtiness to you and to other people. Ah! I was taught better! Many a bitter but needful lesson I had to learn. I had to accustom myself to take the lowest place—to be last instead of first. I wanted humiliation, if ever proud spirit did, and I had it abundantly."

"It will all work for good in the end, Margaret."

"I know it, dear. I trust and believe it has worked for good already. Some natures require but little discipline; but mine was one that called for heavy chastisement—perhaps it still needs the rod."

After these talks with Mirrie, all my friends told me that I looked quite another creature. The Brewster girls said my old companion had cheered me wonderfully; while Mrs. Brown rejoiced over my improved health and spirits; and Jane asked me one day, rather timidly, whether something had not transpired to make me very happy?

I had so much confidence in her now, and she had been so much of a sister to me in my seasons of depression, and in a slight illness I had at the commencement of that winter, that I felt it would be a relief to speak once more of that which was nearest my heart. Accordingly, I told her why I had left my family clandestinely; why I had been so anxious to preserve the secret of my whereabouts; and why the necessity of anything like mystery was happily no more. I had nothing now to hide; for the one person for whose sake I had sought concealment could be no longer benefited by my maintaining the sort of *incognito* I had assumed. Henceforth I had no secret to guard. I could be open as the day, though of course all that concerned my attachment to Gilbert was for her ear alone.

A more faithful friend than Jane Brown I could not have found; and she was sympathizing as faithful, and wise as sympathizing; and I always felt stronger and more inclined to patient waiting after my conversations with her. She was going to be married early in the ensuing summer, and I felt that I should miss her sadly, though she was going no further away than the Hampstead-road. Still, Jane Brown and Mrs. Wright must be in some sense very different personages; but I hoped that I should have news of Gilbert—perhaps see him—long ere Jane's wedding-day arrived.

And so that second winter in London passed away, and I hailed with joy the lengthening days, and looked eagerly for he first snowdrops in Russell-square; for "early in March" Mirrie had said Gilbert might be looked for at St. Eldred's.

And I had written to Alice Tredgold, and told her where I was, and what I was doing, and entreated to be told about themselves. And Alice had written back very fully, speaking freely, too, of her brother, and telling me as much as she knew of his rupture with Mr. Saunderson, an event which did not seem to have caused any great consternation at the North Fort, for they had long been disenchanted, and had seen Gilbert's future in connection with his tyrannical, prejudiced patron in anything but a promising point of view. I had thought the poor old people would have been stunned at the news of Mr. Saunderson's displeasure; but I found that it was rather a relief than otherwise to know that their son was free once more—for there had been strange, unnatural jealousy manifested by the adopted father with respect to the real parents. Money for them Gilbert might have at pleasure, but intercourse with them must be limited. Mr. Saunderson would rarely permit him the indulgence of a visit to St. Eldred's, and even too many letters from that place evoked his wrath, and made him irritable and suspicious. He would fain—so Alice thought—have separated Gilbert entirely from his kindred; he would provide for them amply, but his *protégé*—his adopted son—must be devoted to himself *only!* Poor Gilbert! his had been no enviable lot! Apparently he had been kept in complete subjection. The bread of dependence, though gilded metaphorically, as were literally the oats of Caligula's pampered charger, is generally bitter; and Gilbert had found it year by year more unpalatable and more indigestible. At length he was discarded because he would not sell himself for gold and grandeur!

It was my greatest comfort to write to and to hear from Alice; and I begged her to treat me as a sister, and if anything were wanted at home to let me know, since I could know no deeper pleasure, in Gilbert's absence, than to minister to the needs of the parents whom he so fondly and so dutifully loved. And I could do it, for I was laying money by; my wants being few, and in excess of my income, which was continually increasing.

And the snowdrops came and went, and I looked every

day for tidings of Gilbert. He had sailed in the "Ellerslie" to Shanghae, and I anxiously searched the columns of shipping intelligence for news of the barque, now due in Southam Harbour. But the month of March slowly, sadly waned—and a very wild March it was, going out as it came in, like a raging lion—and still there was no account of the "Ellerslie;" still Alice had only hopes and anticipations to talk about; and still they watched at the North Fort for blessed tidings of the son and brother. When April came, and the sunny days were bright, my heart grew sick within me; I was glad that I had plenty of work to do, that I really had not time to fret, and wear myself out with miserable forebodings. But patience grew very tired, and faith was weak and wavering.

It was the end of April when I saw in the papers the announcement of two marriages which interested me deeply. The first, and by far the more important, was that of my cousin Sibyl to Mr. Saunderson! The other that of Cecilia Churchman to the "Eustace" she had talked to me about that weary night at Kingsdown. I wondered whether she had married with or without consent. I had not heard from her for some months, her last letter being in answer to mine, in which I thanked her heartily for all her goodness, and returned the £5 she had so considerately forced upon me. She had disclaimed the idea of "goodness," begged me to apply to her if ever I needed money, and she had written in her own particularly rapturous style about Eustace, whom she called "the most archangelic darling in creation;" but she had said not one word about any prospect of marriage, and her father's name was not even mentioned.

I could only hope the "archangelic" Eustace would realize all her expectations. As for the other wedding, I doubted not that both parties would gain exactly what they sought, and, perhaps, a little more.

CHAPTER XLI.

THE OLD PEOPLE.

It was May, and still no tidings of the "Ellerslie," and her owners began to fear that she would never be heard of any more. And others besides her owners feared too; the captain's wife and children, the first mate's orphan sisters, and the sadly anxious family at the North Fort. Alice's letters kept up bravely till the middle of April; then she suddenly gave way, and admitted that the most dreadful apprehensions haunted her continually. The spring had been unwontedly stormy; the columns of all the newspapers daily recorded fresh wrecks, and the names of vessels *missing* which by calculation ought to have arrived in port; and the minds of all who had any deep interest in seafaring matters were terribly depressed.

As for myself, though the dread was never absent from my mind, though I lay tossing on my bed at night listening to the furious wind dealing with the Bloomsbury and Holborn chimney-pots, and though I dreamt—if sleep surprised me—horrible dreams of shipwreck and drowning, and actually heard the roaring of the waves, and tasted the bitter brine upon my sobbing lips, I never quite lost hope till one fair June morning, when some one told me that on all hands the "Ellerslie" was now counted as lost; that the owners had ceased their inquiries for her; for vessels that had left the port from whence she sailed weeks afterwards were safely moored ere this in London or Easthambury Docks, or were in Southam Water—though all had encountered much foul weather, and some had reached the harbour almost dismantled by the fury of the tempest. All brought news of heavy gales, and signals of distress in every latitude; and some brought home actual accounts of wrecks, of the sea strewn with spars and the *débris* of lost ships; of boats floating keel upwards on the waves; of rescued crews; of casks and bottles, picked up from time to time, containing last farewells and messages from those who were now quietly sleep-

ing beneath the restless waters, till the great day when the sea should restore her dead. But there were no tidings of the "Ellerslie:" she had sailed, she had been spoken with about two hundred miles from land; but that was all that could be recounted of her. No; and never more would she be seen, with her proud sails fluttering in the wind, her pennons streaming in the breeze, and her graceful bows cleaving the blue waves. She, like many another gallant vessel, had

> "Vailed her topsails to the sands,
> And bowed her noble mast."

She had gone down to swell the treasures of the great deep's mighty storehouse; and with her many a brave heart was stilled for ever, many a bright eye closed! Ah! the Southern Cross, in its purple midnight sky, shone on many an unknown grave; for the wild sea keeps no records of her slain, and none may pause to weep because there a friend or a brother rests in hope, waiting for the resurrection morning! Only it is joy to think that *all* the earth is the Lord's—the ocean fastnesses and the coral caves, as surely as the quiet green "God's Acre"—or the solemn minster tomb! God guards the precious clay wherever it may be; and at the appointed time will raise it up again to immortality and glory. Let the blue main sweep on, and the flowers flourish in the churchyard; let the martyrs' dust be given to the winds, and the mountain cairn be lost to memory; it matters not, for "the earth is the Lord's and the fulness thereof." Yea, "in His hand are the deep places of the earth; the strength of the hills is His also. The sea is His and He made it, and His hands formed the dry land." So that our dead cannot rest where He is not, where His angels cannot guard the poor worn-out garment of the flesh, that is needed no more, till the spirit shall be clothed afresh in the life everlasting; for "precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of His saints."

In July I resolved to go down to St. Eldred's, and I wrote to Susan Pratter, asking her to receive me for the few weeks that I could be absent from London. Her reply was the

most incoherent epistle it has ever been my lot to read, but it was all enthusiastic response from "My ever dear young mistress" to "Your faithful and devoted servant, Susan Pratter." So once more I trod the haunts of childhood, and saw the great Tor Head and the scarred cliffs; and once more I mused on the shingly shore, and listened to the glorious anthem of the waves, as, full, and deep, and grand, like mighty organ chords, it broke the stillness of the sultry summer's day. Once it had seemed to me as if the floods lifted up their voice in one exulting hymn of praise, one perpetual *Te Deum*, saying evermore, "We praise Thee, O God, we acknowledge Thee to be the Lord!" But now, as the familiar sounds broke on my ear, I thought the solemn harmony was like a requiem—a dirge for those who slept beneath the billow; and the low moaning of the waves made me think no longer of the *Nunc Dimittis* on a quiet, shadowy afternoon, but of a *Miserere* chant in a wailing minor key.

How welcome I was to Alice, and to her parents, I need scarcely say; and how we talked, sitting on the rocks of the Point, evening after evening, trying to convince ourselves that the wanderer would come back. And we told each other tales of strange returns, stories of men who had sailed long ago in early manhood for some far-off country, and had suddenly re-appeared at middle age, when all their friends and kinsmen thought them dead. Stephen Tredgold especially had really known several cases of the kind, and he would not *yet*, he said, give up his son for lost. Not till *seven years* were past and gone would he put on mourning for him.

Seven years! Could it be possible to bear suspense so long? Alice sadly shook her head; she could not believe in seven years involuntary exile now-a-days; neither, indeed, could I. Such things might well be in the old time, when no steam-ships ploughed the ocean, when pirates and slavers were a real source of terror, and when there was but little intercourse between the nations. But now, when the black flag was almost a myth, when hostile fleets no longer scoured

the main, when every island, rock, and coral reef seemed mapped out by the geographer, and visited by missionaries or by the sons of commerce, it was surelynext to an impossibility to play the part of Robinson Crusoe, or to endure the horrors of unjust captivity, for miserable years. But Stephen said "it might be. Who could tell? Some day the boy would come back again." And we tried to believe him, and even talked of the manner of his return; till, in spite of our sinking hearts, we smiled at all our fears, and promised ourselves a blissful meeting—*soon;* yes, very soon—before the summer days were over.

But when Stephen Tredgold went away to the flagstaff, his wife, looking me straight in the face, said: "Miss Margaret, I am not so sanguine as his father; I do not look ever to see my boy again on this side heaven. It is very hard; but the Lord gave and the Lord taketh away. Blessed be the name of the Lord."

"Do you remember that evening long ago, when Mirrie Downing and I came to tea—when first you were settled at the Fort?"

"Ah! well I remember it. And Alice told me how *he* showed you the painted ship, straining in the storm, and the text underneath, '*So He* bringeth them unto their desired haven.' Little I thought then what haven it would be, and that he would reach it before his mother. How fond he was talking about life as a voyage!—a short one for him, dear fellow."

Short indeed, if already the harbour were attained; but, oh! *how safe!* And words of his came back to my memory with a force and significance far deeper than they had borne when uttered:—"Having the Pilot on board, and chart and compass of his providing, I shall get safe into port some time or other!"

Then I began to torture myself with the idea that I was responsible for all this misery. Had I not so impetuously rushed away without an explanation; had I trusted to things coming right, instead of trying to make them right myself, all might have been otherwise. My sudden withdrawal had

not altered Gilbert's decision—he had remained faithful to me for all the influences brought so heavily to bear upon his mind. I had proved what Mr. Saunderson called "the strength and unselfishness of my affection" *in vain.* I had renounced all thought of marriage with Gilbert that I might not blight his prospects; and now, what had become of the vaunted future for which I had sacrificed so much? Alas! I had sacrificed not alone myself—that would have been a small thing; but my friend as well!

It never occurred to me, in those moments of bitter self-reproach, to reflect that Gilbert would probably have chosen a seafaring life under any circumstances. Had I remained to brave the storm, and had I gone, as Gilbert suggested, to his parents, till he should be justified in claiming me for himself, still the same disasters might have happened; still he would probably have made this voyage, and the "Ellerslie" would have been missing all the same. Oh, these "ifs," and "might have beens!" How we torment ourselves with them! how needlessly we aggravate our sorrows, and increase our burdens, by questioning God's providence! Only in this instance I had some cause for doubt; I had not asked for guidance when I concluded to take Mr. Saunderson at his word; I had *not* committed my way unto the Lord, trusting also in Him that He would bring it to pass. I had acted, as I thought, for the best; but if I had first prayed earnestly for wisdom and for guidance, I should have felt none of these agonizing doubts; I should have been quite certain then that all was right, that all was "ordered and sure." Yet it was a great comfort to remember how instinctively, as it were, I had cried to God to help me, and keep me from this evil, when I was watching that solitary sail on the grey waters of the Bristol Channel, on that memorable afternoon on the cliffs of Cleeve. There was little of true faith; nothing of calm submission, in that prayer, wrung out, I doubt not, by the exigencies of the hour: still, it was a prayer, and perhaps God had heard it—and *thus* had answered it.

Then I remembered how the clouds had parted overhead,

how the western sky grew suddenly all bright and fair, and how on the waves lay that line of golden light, like a shining path leading far away to the portals of the land of rest. I remembered how, instead of the leaden gloom, a broad space of blue smiled upon me, and how something seemed to say to me, "Be of good cheer; all will yet be well." And I had interpreted the omen in my own way, not thinking that God's "well" is often, for a while, our sadness.

I lingered at St. Eldred's till September; and nothing was heard of the ill-fated "Ellerslie." Then it was time to go back to town, for my pupils were waiting for me: and less than ever now could I afford to indulge in idleness, for Gilbert's parents and his sisters were to me a sacred charge, and the sweetest consolation I could know on earth would be in ministering to them. And I felt happier than I had felt for many a day, when the dear old people accepted me as a daughter, and promised to take from me, as from their own child, whatever I might send them. And at my earnest request they dropped the long-accustomed "Miss" in speaking to me, and I was only "Margaret," as I had been to those dead ones sleeping so peacefully in the quiet upland churchyard of North Combe. It was with a pang that I prepared to leave St. Eldred's; for now the place seemed dearer to me than ever. I could have lingered long on that quiet shore, where all was still save the thunder of the waves, and the plaintive cry of the sea birds, whose white wings were ever flitting over the golden brown sands, or gleaming like silver against the deep blue sky or the sable passing cloud. I stood underneath the beetling cliffs, the full tide surges at my feet, and the olive fringes of long weed tossing wildly about the eddies caused by the submerged rocks; and in my thoughts the words ringing,

> "'Come to thy God in time!'
> Thus saith the ocean chime:
> 'Storm, billow, whirlwind past,
> Come to thy God at last.'"

I took Bertha back with me to London, to her extreme satisfaction, and to my own great comfort; for she was

growing up singularly like her brother—a very handsome, sensible, well-conducted girl. I intended to arrange for her to attend a morning school in the neighbourhood of Bloomsbury. Some of her studies she could carry on by herself, and I could give her music lessons in the evenings. She would not allow any one to speak of Gilbert in the past tense; for she was quite sure he lived, and would return some day when we least expected it: and often her sanguine spirit infected mine, and I too could hope to see my friend again, and, meanwhile, be patient till the time should come.

As the autumn closed in, my pupils multiplied, and I felt justified in raising my terms: for now I had not only myself to think about, but the dear old people at St. Eldred's. And they needed many comforts and some luxuries; and surely I had a right—it was my duty, as well as my joy—to succour them; for when all was said and done, I was certainly the cause of the estrangement between Gilbert and his patron; though I very much doubted whether, under any circumstances, the bond would not have been summarily broken had no such person as Margaret Torrington existed. The old gentleman had had his whim out, and was evidently tired of Gilbert; while, on the other hand, Gilbert himself, harassed and hampered in many ways, was longing to be free, and only hesitating lest his own heart should condemn him for ingratitude, and on account of the dear ones at St. Eldred's. I had written to the Norths while I was at the sea-side, and explained to them the reason of my long silence, and Mrs. North had kindly answered my letter immediately; so that once more I was in communication with these charming people and true friends, and from them I learnt how things were going on in Cotswoldbury.

Mr. North had been most successful in his new calling. His editorship was highly prosperous, and he was beginning to be known as an author. His works were all well spoken of, and they passed rapidly through several editions, and promised to become standard authorities. "After all," wrote Mrs. North, 'that bank failure was good for us. William would never have exerted himself as he had done had our little property

remained intact. As it is, he had not only equalled but greatly exceeded our former income; and, if God grant him health and strength, I believe his prospects will improve continually. Ah, Margaret! do you remember how dark all things looked to us two years ago? In spite of my bravery—half of it assumed, I am afraid, for William's sake —I did tremble as I looked round on husband and children, and knew that our little *all* was gone. It was hard to believe that the trouble would work out for our own temporal good, and yet there was the promise; and God has been as good as His Word. It roused my husband, it brought out his latent powers, it developed talent and habits of research that he scarcely knew were his. He was always loved and respected, for he is so good; but now he is widely honoured and men speak his name with reverence. I am so proud of him! Why, he has been elected an F.S.A., and an F.G.S., and something else, since since you left us to go away to Cleeve-super-Mare! As for Hetty, it has made a little woman of her, and now we can give her advantages she never hoped for in the old days of our settled, but most tiny income. Willy grows a great boy, and is going soon to the Cotswoldbury College. Marian, of course, runs about, and is always in mischief, and chatters away as long as ever she can keep awake; and the new baby, whom we have called Maggie, after you, is the healthiest little creature. Surely the lines have fallen to us in pleasant places; surely we have a goodly heritage. More than ever I feel the truth of that stanza—

> 'Thy God knows what for thee is best;
> What looks the worst may work thy weal.
> Seek holiness – and for the rest
> Leave it with God Himself to deal.'"

Then followed much about my own matters, much tender sympathy, and many words of cheer! they, too—Mrs. North, her husband, and Hetty—thought it was too soon yet to give Gilbert up. Finally, I was invited to spend Christmas at the Cottage of Content; but I felt too unsettled as yet to make any promises. Besides, I had

Bertha in my care, and I could not leave her alone with Mrs. Brown, who was more than ever occupied now that Jane was married.

About the same time that I renewed my correspondence with the Norths, I wrote to my uncle, explaining to him what he knew well enough before—the cause of my abrupt withdrawal from his guardianship.

I confessed that I was not quite sure now whether I had acted wisely, though I had taken the step from a most unselfish motive; and if I had offended him I craved to be forgiven. I told him that I was succeeding admirably in my profession, and that I should not wish any transfer of my little fortune till the following summer, when I should be of age. I sent my love to Gussie, and begged that she might be allowed to write to me, and if Mr. Crofton would send me a few lines himself it would give me unfeigned pleasure.

I waited with some little anxiety for an answer to my carefully worded epistle, and by return of post I received an envelope directed by my Uncle Crofton's hand. Inside was my own letter, and a slip of paper having on it these words: "Mr. Crofton returns Miss Torrington's letter, as that young person is entirely a stranger to the family at Crofton Lawn."

CHAPTER XLII.

FIVE O'CLOCK TEA.

It was one of those mild November days that come sometimes to gladden us with their brief pensive beauty, when we are looking only for chilly winds, and damps, and murky skies; and, having business to transact at Kensington, I was glad to avail myself of a chance leisure afternoon to take the Bayswater omnibus, intending to go down the Broad Walk to Phillimore-place, whither my engagement led me. I took Bertha with me, for she was anxious to visit Kensington-gardens, though I warned her she would see them at this time of the year to a great disadvantage.

We took a very early dinner, and set out on our expedition, so that it was not more than half-past two when, having kept my appointment in Phillimore-place, we turned into the gardens nearly opposite the Gloucester-road.

The day was still bright and balmy, and the sun was sinking like a great ball of fire between the boles of the stately oaks and chestnuts, turning the sere leaves in our path, and the few that yet lingered on their parent branches, to shreds of ruddy gold. Many nursemaids and troops of children were running about, and some few ladies and gentlemen were strolling up and down, evidently making the very best of this kindly parting gleam of "St. Martin's Little Summer." At no great distance we followed two ladies, who were proceeding at a leisurely pace up one of the principal walks. We did not overtake them, because we paused from time to time to examine some of the choice evergreen shrubs in the border; and I scarcely noted them till, coming nearer, I heard their voices, and found that they had turned, and that we should meet them face to face in another minute. The level sunshine dazzled me so thoroughly that I could discern little more than the figures of these ladies; but they, of course, could see me quite clearly; and I felt, rather than saw, as they came close to me, that one of them was regarding me with the closest scrutiny. I tried to look up, but had to cover my eyes directly, for we had lost the shelter of the interlacing boughs; and, while I was thinking how foolish one felt at being suddenly reduced to all but perfect blindness for the want of a parasol or umbrella, my hands, or rather my arms, were violently seized; a sky-blue velvet bonnet, and feather to match, and a flood of golden ringlets hid the sunshine from my dazed and aching sight, and half-a-dozen very demonstrative kisses were pressed upon my lips, while a familiar voice cried, "Margaret? As I live, here is Margaret again! Where have you been hiding all this time! You naughty, naughty girl. Come and give an account of yourself."

"Nora! Mrs. Druce!"

"Don't be Mrs. Druce-ing *me*, I pray! I am Nora, if you please; as flighty and impracticable as ever! Matrimony has not made me at all more sensible, though I have two babies—such fine creatures, Margaret; only they have such lungs! I am convinced that the Druces are descended in a direct line from Stentor, they are such a noisy set; my boys the noisiest of all. Come along! but won't you speak to Gussie?"

"Gussie! the sun must have dazzled me indeed, not to see Gussie. Oh! Gussie, my darling! But how you are grown! You are nearly as tall as Nora. No wonder I did not know you."

It was Gussie's turn now. Ever demonstrative to an extreme degree, she was kissing and fondling me, right in the midst of Kensington-gardens, as vigorously as she had scratched and "nipped" me in the old time, in our attic-chamber at Crofton Lawn. She had grown immensely, and Mrs. Druce, a little ashamed of her ungainly appearance, as a school-room young lady, had rashly put her into long dresses, and turned up her back hair, so that, with the sunshine in my eyes, it was no wonder that in the tall, grown-up looking young woman before me I did not immediately recognise my pet and quondam pupil, Gussie.

"There, there, Gussie, that will do! My dear, consider; this is a public place; there are two gentlemen coming, and a policeman or ranger in the distance. We shall be taken up for general impropriety of behaviour!"

All this time Bertha had stood silently and somewhat confused at my elbow. Truth to tell, in the surprise of meeting, and the joy of cordial recognition, I had for the moment forgotten her. I made haste, however, to atone for my neglect, and introduced her as "Miss Bertha Tredgold."

"Not Gilbert's sister?" cried Gussie, in her own impetuous way. "That is *too* good! I was afraid she was some stiff, horrid pupil! Now we are all friends together. Nora! let us get round to the carriage, and drive home as quickly ever we can!"

"But we must go home to Bloomsbury," I said; "it will be quite dark before we get there."

"My carriage shall take you home at any time," replied Leonora.

"But Mrs. Brown will be waiting tea for us."

"Who on earth is Mrs. Brown?"

I explained; and Nora pulled a long face. "Keeps a shop, and sells wools and envelopes, and ring-trays! Margaret, you are the most eccentric of mortals. But never mind Mrs. Brown; she must wait for once. The tea will only be a little stronger and not quite so warm when she does drink it. The worst that can happen is the toast or muffins being spoilt. Actual tea at five o'clock, too! How do you manage to exist in so abnormal a state?"

"It is scarcely abnormal to me. You must remember that I was but just out of the school-room when I left Cotswoldbury and commenced the life I lead at present. It is not so much the question of wasting tea I am thinking about, as Mrs. Brown's anxiety if we do not return at the proper time."

"Will she not think we are staying in Phillimore-place?" suggested Bertha. "Mrs. Travis did ask us to stop for the school-room tea; and I have known you stay out on several occasions when you were absent on similar business."

"Of course Mrs. Brown will know you are safe with Mrs. Somebody; or if she does not, an hour's suspense will do her no great harm, I dare say. I won't ask you to stay dinner,—we never dine before seven or eight; but come and have a cup of tea in my boudoir, and tell me all the news."

"Five o'clock tea and kettle-drums were not then invented; but early teas were nevertheless taken surreptitiously, as it were, by the fashionable world even then: for exhausted human nature craved some sustenance, or, at least, some stimulant between two o'clock luncheon and a dinner six hours later, and accordingly refreshed itself with tea and wafer bread and butter in solitude or in select companionship. Out of this informal habit grew the

sensible, recognised five o'clock anti-prandial tea, and the cosiest of all fashionable gatherings — the comfortable "kettle-drum." The temptation to drink tea, and that with Nora and Gussie, was irresistible; so we succumbed without further parley; and, finding Mrs. Druce's carriage, drove away as rapidly as a pair of high-stepping bays could carry us to the palatial residence—or so it seemed to my bewildered senses—of Captain Druce.

Bertha, of course, had never set foot in such a house before; but she showed her innate good breeding by not making the slightest observation, or evincing the least surprise. To see her take her seat in a charming *fauteuil* in Nora's luxurious dressing-room or boudoir, with scarcely a glance at the countless little prettinesses and conveniences around her, one would have thought she had been accustomed all her life to the elegancies and appliances of a class of society of which she really knew nothing except by hearsay.

Gussie burst out, as soon as ever we had taken our bonnets off, "Now, Margaret, tell me about Gilbert. Where is he? I hope he is getting along charmingly, if it is only to disappoint my disagreeable brother-in-law, Mr. Saunderson."

I think the blank expression of my face, and the sudden drooping of Bertha's eyelids, told her she had asked a painful question lightly, for her cheeks flushed, and she begged my pardon if she had said anything incautiously. I scarcely know how we did it, but Bertha and I told between us the melancholy story of the missing "Ellerslie;" and then all Gussie's brightness was gone, and she came and sat on the footstool at my feet, and, laying her head on my lap, wept unrestrainedly. Leonora, too, sat sad and sorrowful, the large tears trembling in her sweet blue eyes; and she clasped Bertha's hand in hers, but did not speak. And we two, with whom the terrible reality had dwelt so long, were silent also, essaying in vain to find words that would not be broken off in wild and passionate weeping. This unexpected manifestation of a complete sympathy was almost

more than we could bear; it unhinged us more than anything we had yet encountered.

"But we do not quite give him up," I strove to say, calmly. "We cannot believe that—"

"No!" interposed Gussie, raising her tear-stained face; "it cannot be! God would not let him perish surely, when so many people were watching and waiting for him to come back again. And yet—yet I don't know, Margaret; he was so good; and it is the best who are taken. You know we gather the fairest flowers in the woods and in the garden, and we choose the ripest fruit. And if God has taken him, it is to great joy and blessedness; and he has escaped one cannot say how many sorrows. Still, I think I shall see Gilbert Tredgold again, and shall thank him for what he said to me at Cleeve-super-Mare two years ago. Something tells me he will come back again."

"I feel certain of it, too," cried Bertha, dashing away her tears. "Oh, yes! Gilbert will come back some day when we are least expecting him: only Margaret has made me down-hearted of late. She and my mother have lost all hope, I think."

"No," I said, "not *all* hope, Bertha. But hope deferred grows fainter as the days go by. The longer the period since the "Ellerslie" was heard of, the smaller and fewer are the chances of our hearing of its crew."

"You have *prayed* that Gilbert may come back?" said Gussie in a low, earnest whisper.

"Yes, dear; but God may not see fit to answer that prayer. He does not give us all we ask, but all that is good for us. There are some prayers that we are certain will be answered, others that we are not so sure about, because we may ask for that which would be hurtful to us,—for that, too, which would be against God's glory. We are so blind, so ignorant, we know so little, we see so dimly, it is best to leave such things in His hands—to say in all our petitions, '*Thy* will be done.'"

"That is hard, Margaret, in such a case as this; so hard as to be nearly impossible!"

"Unless God teach us! But oftentimes the very withholding of the blessings we seek is a lesson too sadly needed to teach us to give up our own will, to be content to lay the matter in God's hands, and leave it there, being certain that He will do all things well, and bring everything to a happy issue, if not in this life, yet in the life to come."

Gussie and I had our little talk to ourselves, while Nora was questioning Bertha about the exact time of the "Ellerslie's" sailing from China, and the name of her owners, and other small matters respecting the ill-fated vessel. Then tea was brought in, the lamps were lighted, and the curtains drawn, and we all four sat round the hearth—three of us talking of old times at Cotswoldbury, and Bertha listening with eager and deferential interest.

"Did not Sibyl's marriage take you by surprise?" asked Mrs. Druce, presently.

"Not entirely. Gilbert always fancied that the singular intimacy between two so dissimilar would end so. But, Nora, did my uncle really consent?"

"Of course he did! Trust papa for consenting to a wealthy marriage! Still, I must do him the justice to say that he asked Sibyl if she had thought seriously of the step she was about to take; and he told her she had better remain a spinster to her dying hour than marry a man for whom she could entertain no affection."

"I am glad he said so much. What did Sibyl say?"

"She said that she had a very sincere regard for Mr. Saunderson; that she was quite old enough to choose for herself—an indisputable truth that no one wanted to gainsay—only sometimes, you know, wisdom does not come with increase of years. But to every expostulation she replied that she had made up her mind to marry Mr. Saunderson, and it was mere waste of breath to endeavour to dissuade her. Nevertheless, I made a strenuous effort the week before the wedding; my husband and I went down to Cotswoldbury, and he begged me to try my influence with Sibyl. It seemed so dreadful that she should *sell herself!*—for you know, we could not believe that she really cared

for that ugly, ill-tempered old man; we both felt sure that it was only his money she wanted. But she baffled me somehow; she turned the conversation whenever we came to a certain point; and one day she assured me that she was 'very fond of her affianced husband, and had made up her mind to be extremely happy.'"

"There is no accounting for tastes," said Gussie, with infinite disdain. "Fancy having that purple nose always before you; fancy being bawled at, and having to bawl back again, every day of your life; fancy being sworn at. Why, one day, Margaret—it was soon after they were engaged—Sibyl paid some little attention to her elderly lover—gave him a footstool to rest his gouty leg on, and said something about hoping he was better—though whether she meant in his health or in his temper, I do not know, and because she was a little awkward—or he said so,—he kicked the footstool to the other end of the room! And I thought if she met with such treatment in courting days, what would her married life be like? He looked as if he wished to beat her."

"She told Captain Druce she *liked* him," said Nora; and she declared she looked forward to great happiness as Mrs. Saunderson; he wanted some one to take care of him, and it would be her pleasure to render all those attentions he so peculiarly required. And what do you think my husband said?"

"Nay, I cannot tell; but whatever he might say, Sibyl would answer readily enough."

"She did not answer him, however. He looked very gravely at her, and repeated those absurd lines,—

'There was a lady loved a swine.
"Honey!" says she,
"You shall have a silver trough."
"Ugh!" says he.'

As Mr. Saunderson is very much given to grunting when things go against the grain, the application was very pointed."

"And how did she behave on her wedding-day?"

"With the utmost propriety; but she looked dreadfully old and worn—decidedly older than mamma, I thought. However, she had a splendid *trousseau;* mine was nothing to it. Papa grumbled dreadfully about the outlay, but Sibyl, of course, had her will. She can never wear out half the clothes she has. I began to count her dresses, and came to forty-three, and then I left off in sheer despair, for I had not included morning robes or demi-toilettes. She had *moire-antiques* of all shades and colours; satins, silks of every texture, gauzes, muslins, velvets, cashmeres—real ones, of course; and, oh! such laces! She had a regular *corbeille*, too—Paris fashion; the first instalment, I suppose, of the price she was to receive for the loss of her liberty. If her sexagenarian beau did not always display his taste, he certainly spared no expense; for jewels he must have ransacked the Rue de la Paix, and where he got all the point and real Spanish lace from I cannot tell. Well, if clothes, jewels, and costly toys can reconcile Sibyl to her lot, she will be, or she may be, tolerably happy."

"Have you seen her since her marriage?"

"Oh, no! my dear. The happy couple have been on the Continent ever since; but they are coming home for Christmas; and Tenterly has been newly furnished from roof to basement. And new carriages are ready for them; and the house in town, too, has undergone wonderful renovations; and Sibyl will have her box at the opera, of course, and she will have the tallest footman, and the tiniest page, and the largest diamonds, and the smallest lap-dog, and the most expensive *maître d'hôtel*, and consequently the most *recherché* dinners; *also* the most irascible husband of any lady in London!"

"But Mr. Saunderson is not really sixty?"

"Not far from it, I believe, though he only owns to fifty-four, and Sibyl is in her twenty-fifth year! But his gout torments him so much, and his breathing is so wheezy, and he drinks so much port wine, and suffers for it so severely, that he might pass for papa's papa. There, my dear, that is the story of my sister's splendid marriage; now, let us talk

no more about it till we are obliged to do so. He will beat her, or knock her down, or otherwise maltreat her presently, I dare say; and then we shall be compelled to go into the subject again, for she will want to leave him, and that will not be permitted. Papa made her understand that, as Mrs. Saunderson, she could never be his home-daughter again; and he warned her that if she did anything very rash—ran away, for instance,—she could not expect to be received by him. But she will run away sooner or later; I am sure I should. But in such case she can claim no settlements; it remains to be seen how long she can endure her gilded slavery and her tyrant's rod. Poor Sibyl!"

Poor Sibyl, indeed! But she had deliberately chosen her own lot;—only she would have preferred Gilbert, and on that account I felt a little sorry for her; though my sympathy vanished the moment I began to reflect that Gilbert, the heir of Tenterly, and Gilbert of the North Fort, would be to her two distinct and different personages—the former she would joyfully have consented to wed; the latter would have been no more to her than the servants in her father's kitchen.

We had some more conversation, and then it was time for us to go home. Mrs. Druce was going out to dinner, and she had to dress, while Gussie had lessons to prepare for her German master. The carriage came round, and in luxurious state we were borne away to our own humble abode in King-street, promising, as we said farewell, to spend a day in Brook-street very soon.

When we reached Mrs. Brown's, the shop was shut up, at which I was rather surprised, for the good lady was not usually among the early closers. Mrs. Wright came out to meet us as we entered, her cheeks flushed, and her eyes sparkling with excitement.

"Where have you been? where have you been?" she cried. "Mother is in such a state?"

"I am so sorry—I was afraid; but,"—and I began hurriedly to explain,—"I hoped she would not wait tea—I have begged her never to do so—my pupils so often want me to remain, and I cannot always refuse or know beforehand."

"Oh! that is not it; only there have been visitors."

"Visitors for *me!*" There was such a strange fluttering at my heart that I could say no more.

"Yes; but come into the parlour—there is only mother there now."

The fluttering ceased; my heart grew quiet and cold again; the one visitor that *might* have come would never have gone away ere we returned. Sadly, and quite without interest in the person or persons who had called upon me in my absence, I followed Jane into the parlour. The decanters and wine-glasses stood upon the table; but there was no one in the room save Mrs. Brown, who seemed deeply absorbed in a difficult stitch she was trying to make out from a new "knitting-book," sent to her the day before as a curiosity. But I thought she was paler than usual, and certainly her hands trembled, or else my misty eyes deceived me.

CHAPTER XLIII.

THE FATE OF THE "ELLERSLIE."

"I AM so sorry, Mrs. Brown," I began, as the good lady looked up from her knitting, and regarded me with a decidedly peculiar expression: "I hope you have not been anxious?"

"Oh, no, my dear," replied Mrs. Brown—"I knew you were all safe; but visitors came, and—Oh, Jane, just see what a mess I'm making with this row!"

"Just leave it alone, mother; it is all wrong together: see! half the stitches are dropped. Sit down, now, and tell Margaret and Bertha about their visitors,—or, rather, I should say, their *visitor;* for it was only one person who so anxiously desired to see them. Margaret, will you not take a chair? Don't look so pale; nothing is the matter,—nothing, at least, but what is good."

I looked at Bertha; she was leaning against the mantelpiece, and trembling visibly, and her eyes were asking the

question her lips refused to speak. "Is it any one—?" I managed to say; and then I looked imploringly at Mrs. Wright to tell me all, without any more preamble. But Bertha burst out—"Just say who it was, *please*? Tell us out at once; it will not kill us. Was it any one who sailed in the "Ellerslie?"

"Yes!" replied both mother and daughter in a breath. "Some one who can tell you all about Mr. Tredgold," said the former, eagerly; while Jane hastened to add, "And he has nothing but what is good to tell you, either."

"It is Gilbert himself," exclaimed Bertha. "Margaret, I know it is!"

I looked at Jane and at Mrs. Brown, and there was no disclaimer on their lips; only Mrs. Brown's eyes were filled with nervous but happy tears, and Jane's face was all one glow with sympathy and smiles. Then I was certain! Gilbert had come back! he was not very far away, and I should see him soon; but for a few minutes I could not ask a question. I could not speak; and I envied Bertha the relief of a good hearty cry, in which she immediately indulged. Was I waking or dreaming? Had Gilbert really returned, or should I rouse up presently in the grey wintry dawn, to find myself in my own chamber, once more grieving over the bright vision that had shone and faded in the night? Surely this time it was real, and no fair dream to mock the weary spirit, no sweet delusion to embitter waking moments!"

Presently I found that Jane was "telling me all about it:" how, just as the tea was drawing, and Mrs. Brown was getting out some apricot jam as a special treat for herself, the bell on the shop-door had clanged, and a foreign looking gentleman, muffled in a rough plaid, and with a sort of sailor air about him, had come up to the counter, and inquired of Miss Smith, the young shopwoman, who had taken Jane's place, if Miss Torrington and Miss Tredgold were at home; how she had asked him to walk in, as she was expecting us home every minute, and how the moment she saw him under the gaselier in the parlour—she knew who he was—how his likeness to

Bertha was so striking; how even she had had a sort of intuitive conviction of his identity as soon as ever he spoke; and much more to the same effect that I remembered quite well afterwards, but scarcely seemed to hear while she was talking to me.

"And he did not wait?"

"Oh, yes, he waited; he is upstairs in your little music-room. We told him you were not very well, and he was afraid of the shock for you if you met him suddenly without any preparation. He only left the room as you came into the shop. I will go and tell him you are ready to see him, shall I?" Mother and I are going out for half an hour; we want to see a friend in Holborn."

So Mrs. Brown put away her unlucky knitting into her work-basket, declaring that if ever she made anything of that stitch she would call it the Tredgold pattern, while Jane tripped up-stairs, begging her mother to follow her, or they would be too late. And Bertha and I sat still, neither speaking nor looking at each other till we heard a manly tread in the passage without, and in another minute Gilbert was in the room.

Yes, our own Gilbert indeed, but sadly altered from the blithe, robust young man I had last seen at Cleeve-super-Mare. He was taller and thinner, his face was darker, and his beard much grown; but the thinness was complete attenuation, his whole frame seemed sunken away, and there were hollows in his cheeks, and a worn, almost sad, expression even now in his changed looks. He had evidently suffered much, so much that life had been at stake and health was still considerably impaired.

"*Margaret!*" was all he could say, as he held my hands in his. "Oh, Margaret! why did you leave me?"

"Did you not know *why?* did no one ever tell you? There was one who knew."

"I was only told that you had changed your mind, that you felt you did not love me sufficiently to become my wife, that you thought it best to avoid the pain of explanation, and a great deal more that seemed to me utterly incomprehensible,

and quite irreconcilable with your character, as I knew it long before. But you were gone, I knew not whither. I had parted from you with the certainty that you were to be mine; and all that wretched morning I waited to hear, not any sentence from you,—for all between *us*, I thought, was settled, and I was so sure you would not go back from your word,—but what was to be the course we should pursue, since I was certain that we could expect no favour from Mr. Saunderson or from Mrs. Crofton, in whose hands, we both knew, the family administration really lies. And then I was told vaguely that you were not to be seen, that you would not speak to me that day, but that on the morrow all should be arranged. I could only submit, though I rebelled with all my heart against such unnecessary mystery. I felt assured that some terrible evil was impending, and the morrow would bring me no consolation, but increase of perplexity. I was right: next morning I was told triumphantly that you were gone, no one knew whither, and Sibyl dared to say that it would be quite as well for the family honour if you never reappeared again."

"That was what I feared, Gilbert: I knew Sibyl would be unscrupulous; I felt a miserable presentiment all through that wretched journey that I was being terribly maligned. I cared little about what they would say about me among themselves, but I could not bear the thought of being slandered *to you!*"

"As if you could be slandered to me, Margaret. You might be misrepresented, but it takes two to make a slander. There must be the faithless, treacherous ear, as well as the envenomed tongue. And my ear refused to listen to the tales it might have heard. It heard indeed,—I could scarcely help that; but it did not heed, it did not give one moment's credence! I was certain that in your flight you were blameless—either you were taken away against your will, or you were persuaded to leave me as a duty."

"That was it, Gilbert!" And then I told him, as nearly as I could recollect, all that had passed between Mr. Saunderson and myself. "I need not say I acted for the best,"

I remarked in conclusion; "but I greatly doubt now whether I acted wisely."

"It is not for me to blame you," said Gilbert, rather sadly; "only, Margaret, you should have known me better. Your going away could not possibly make me change my mind; it precipitated matters a little, that was all; for within a day or two Mr. Saunderson, assuming that all was at an end between you and me, proposed that I should marry Sibyl. It was not enough that I must renounce you, but I must put another in your place. On this question we came to issue at once, and my patron gave me three days to think about it—either I must accept Sibyl,—for certainly the acceptance would have been on her side, not on mine—or I must forfeit at once and for ever the position I held as his adopted son and heir. I need not tell you, Margaret, that three minutes were more than I required for deliberation. Even had I not been bound to you, had I never cared for you in the least, never seen you, my decision as regards Miss Crofton would have been the same. Had I, for the sake of worldly advantage, acceded to this proposal, I should have been a ruined man, for my self-respect would have been forfeited, and a sense of cowardice would have sat upon my heart till I died. No! better the old life again; better any privation, any toil, any sorrow; better the hardest struggle for bread than the sacrifice of myself,—than the sin of yielding to marry a woman whom I not only failed to love but to esteem. There is nothing that can justify a man in committing such an error."

"You know that Sibyl is now Mrs. Saunderson?"

"Indeed I do not! I sailed into Southam Water only three days ago. As soon as ever I could leave the ship I saw the owners of the ill-fated 'Ellerslie,' then I hurried down to St. Eldred's, saw the dear old people, and heard all about you, my darling, and heard how you had been and were a daughter to them. I only stayed at the North Fort a few hours, and I arrived at Paddington at three o'clock this afternoon, and came straight here. What a dear old ady Mrs. Brown is!"

"She has been a mother to me. Oh, Gilbert! I have been so watched over, so guided, so kept from danger and evil, cast as *I* was on the great wild sea of life. All has been so beautifully ordered: every step of my way has been made plain. God has been very, very good to me; for it is *He* who has been my Pilot ever since I was left to myself. I have trusted myself to Him, and, though sometimes all has been dark around me, and the winds have risen, and the waves have roared, I never lost the sense of security. I knew that in His own way He was guiding me into the haven,—not the haven I once dreamed of, I had given up *that*,—but to the everlasting haven, whither I would be, where I believed you were already. And now I find it is not so,—you are still a voyager like myself. God has heard our prayers, and given you back to us again. But, Gilbert, where have you been all these weary months?"

"That is a long story, my Margaret. I have been half over the world since I sailed away in the good ship 'Ellerslie,' and I have been in great straits and perils, and suffered much, and there have been times when my heart has died within me, and when I gave up the hope of ever seeing you, and the dear ones at home again. For I have known truly what it is to mount up to the heaven and then go down again to the depths, while my soul and the souls of all in the ship were melted because of trouble. There were days and nights when all seemed lost, when I could say with the Psalmist, 'Deep calleth unto deep at the noise of Thy water-spouts; all Thy waves and Thy billows are gone over me.'"

"Then the 'Ellerslie' was really wrecked?"

"Yes; she went down in the Indian seas. But she was a brave little craft, and she fought for her life to the very last. She lived on, days after the great leak was sprung; and if we could have got into calmer waters we might have saved her; but just as we began to hope that we might yet make land, another and still more terrible storm arose, and our poor shattered bark, after a few hours of struggle, foundered. She went to pieces before our eyes; for we who were not swept away when the great waves rolled in over the bul-

warks, made a little raft, on which we floated for many and many a day. That time, Margaret, is almost too terrible to think about."

"You do not mean you were for days on the open sea, tossing about on a mere raft?"

"It was so indeed. We were drifted we knew not whither. We were drenched with spray, and baked by the sun, and we were dying with hunger and with thirst. Five of us were swept off in a gale that blew hard on the second night, and three of our crew allowed themselves to slip off into the water. 'Better,' they said, 'the fury of the waves than the horrible agony they endured for the want of food and water.' Then the first mate died; and the captain, and one sailor, and I were left; and we grew weaker every hour, especially the captain, who was overcome with grief at the loss of his vessel. I shall never forget waking one morning out of a half-delirious sleep. I had been dreaming of dining with you, Margaret, at Crofton Lawn, and you were heaping dainties on my plate, and pouring out for me large draughts of the clearest and most sparkling water. I actually seemed to taste the delicious meat, and to feel the coolness of the bright cold fluid upon my parched and blackened lips, and I awoke to all the pangs of hunger and maddening thirst and fever pains. But, oh, joy! there was the land scarcely a league off. There it lay in the early sunshine—a beautiful shore—the waves dancing on the sands, and the verdure reaching almost to the water's edge. And gay-plumaged birds were flying out, and we could hear the shrill call of some kind of parrot or cockatoo, and the air was filled with fragrance, making one think of the 'spicy breezes' that 'blow soft on Ceylon's isle.' But Ceylon was hundreds of miles away; for, though we had lost our compass and our reckoning, we knew we were drifting far to the south-east. I sat up, and seized the spar which I had used as an oar, and tried to shape our course landward. Bill Simmons, the sailor, did so too, and he had more strength than I; but the poor captain was past all struggle—his life was ebbing away even then, and he did not know there was a prospect of escape.

I was almost glad to find him unconscious, for he escaped the agony of suspense my comrade and I endured, till a favourable breeze set in, and we floated into a current that carried us, with scarcely an effort of our own, into a little shallow creek, where we could run the raft upon the shore, and land as well as our weakness and our stiffened limbs would let us."

"Thank God, you reached that land! You could not have held out much longer."

"We could not have endured many more hours,—Bill Simmons and I. He, hardy sailor as he was, was failing rapidly; as for myself I had scarcely strength to leave the raft, and when I had done so, I crawled into the shade, and lay down, as I thought, to die."

"Was it an island, or some portion of a continent?"

"An island, a very small and remote one of the Vavao group. At first we believed it was uninhabited, and we thought we had only come ashore to die; for, though we quenched our thirst from the lovely fresh streams flowing from the rocks, we did not know how to procure any food. There were creatures like hares and rabbits running about; and we knew there must be fish for the catching, and fruit in the woods, probably dates and cocoa-nuts, for we could see the leafy crowns of the palm-tree in all directions; but we were too weak to go in search of them, and we had no gun or weapon of any kind wherewith to kill the game that continually crossed our path."

"What could you do?"

"Literally nothing, but ask God to take us in hand, to send us help, if it were His will that we should live on, and, if not, to take us to Himself in peace. And presently we heard footsteps, and dusky-faced men and women came through the forest to look at us. We could not tell whether they would be friends or enemies—they might be a kindly race, or they might be cruel savages; we could only commend ourselves once more to God, and feel that if they treated us ill, or failed to succour us, our sufferings would be short; we were already so far exhausted. But our fears were

groundless; the missionaries had been there before us, and had taught the wild people to reverence the Holy name, and to practise kindness to all the human race. Had we landed on that lonely island eight or ten years earlier, we should probably have furnished the aborigines with a dinner. As it was, they succoured us as tenderly as if we had been their brethren. They fed us, and nursed us, and did for us all that our forlorn condition required; and in a day or two Simmons and I were able to walk about, and to attend to the captain, who was still living, but sinking very fast."

"Poor man! to think after all that help should come in vain!"

"Not quite in vain; for he had nearly every comfort that we could desire for him. The good people raised a tent on purpose for us, and they made a beautiful soft bed or mat of dried grass for the dying man; they gave us milk, and yams, and meat, and most delicious fruit. In short, after the horrors of the wreck, and the hardships of the raft, that cool, quiet tent seemed to us a very paradise. For five days and nights we watched beside our captain; then he died. He was quite conscious to the last. For the last few hours he knew me perfectly, and understood his position, and made me write down messages to his wife and children."

"His wife! Oh, poor woman! Have you seen her, Gilbert?"

Not yet; I came to you first. I shall see Mrs. Nicholson to-morrow. She lives somewhere out at Dalston—wherever that may be—I know so little of London. I suppose I can get there easily?"

"You have only to take a Kingsland omnibus, and you will be near enough; but, oh, Gilbert! what a sad errand yours will be!"

"Not altogether sad, my love: she knows already, or believes, that her husband is dead; but she will be glad to hear how happy his last hours were and how tenderly he thought of her and his children. Even the certainty of her

widowhood will be better than the misery of suspense, the utter ignorance of his fate."

"I suppose so. Still, my heart aches for that poor Mrs. Nicholson. And the captain?—he was happy at the last, you say?"

"Quite happy, for he was a truly Christian man. Simmons was so grieved that no missionary was then on the island, no clergyman, no minister of any kind save two native teachers, whose language we did not in the least understand; but Captain Nicholson told him it mattered very little or not at all, for Christ, the great High Priest, was with him, and he needed no one else. But he asked me to pray with him after he had told me all about his home and what he wished said to Mrs. Nicholson; and, unasked, the two native teachers came and prayed by him, and when they had finished, though he had not comprehended a word, he seemed pleased and comforted, for they pointed upwards and smiled, and he clasped their hands and blessed them in his Master's name. Well, he grew weaker and weaker, but every breath was thankfulness and praise. He was glad, too, he said, to die on land, and rest under the stately trees he could see through the door of the tent; though if he had known the waves were waiting for him he would have said—

> 'Content I take what spot is mine,
> Since all the earth, my Lord, is Thine.'

The sun was just rising behind the palm-trees when I heard him whisper something about 'making the storm a calm;' so I repeated aloud his favourite verses—you and I love them well, Margaret—'He maketh the storm a calm, so that the waves thereof are still. Then are they glad because they be quiet; so He bringeth them unto their desired haven.' And he repeated after me, quite clearly, 'So HE bringeth them unto their desired haven.' He never spoke again, but a minute or two afterwards a beautiful smile broke over his face, and he died. Simmons and I, with the help of the natives, buried him under a splendid tree not ten yards from the tent. I got a stone and cut an inscription

on it in English and in Latin, and I set it at the foot of the grave, and at the head I put a wooden cross. But the rest I must tell you presently, girls, for here is our good Mrs. Brown again."

CHAPTER XLIV.

NORA'S SHOPPING.

I NEED not repeat the rest of Gilbert's narrative word for word: it would occupy too much of my time, and, perhaps, unduly exercise your patience; for details that cannot fail to be fraught with deepest interest to me, may well be to other people thoroughly unimportant, if not tedious. So I will just give as succinct an account as possible of the remaining adventures of the small remnant of the crew of the unfortunate "Ellerslie," ere they, two men only, sailed into Southam Harbour, and set foot once more on English soil.

After Captain Nicholson's death every thought was of course bent on leaving the island. But Gilbert and Simmons were told that it might be "several moons" before any ship came to those shores for water or fruit;—vessels did come occasionally to the Vavao group, calling now at one, and now at another of the islands: but they arrived at most uncertain intervals—sometimes appearing in quick succession, and sometimes not touching there more than twice, or even once in the whole year. "A great ship," the natives said, had been there about half a moon before the strangers came; she had taken in water, and limes, and fresh pork, and had gone on her way; they could not tell at all when another ship might come—it might be to-morrow or next year! So there was nothing for it but to wait with patience, and the two men lived on in the tent the kind natives had lent them for the captain's accommodation, and they fished and hunted and did what work they could for a sustenance.

Presently, to their intense joy, a missionary arrived at

Rara—that was the name of the island on which they had been thrown—and once more they heard their own tongue, and saw a face of the same colour as their own, and were able to procure all the information they desired. As they had suspected, Rara was one of the smallest and the remotest of the habitable Vavaos, and they would be far more likely to meet with a vessel at one of the more important islands; therefore they accompanied the missionary in his small sloop, when, having transacted certain business, he returned to the great station at Waitoa, where they found others of his brethren with their wives, and several Frenchmen who had settled down among the natives. Here they were treated as honoured guests, and the missionary sloop was at once sent round to the other islands to give notice of the presence of the Englishmen, and of their desire to depart by the first vessel that came that way. And, on the highest peak of Waitoa, a flag was hoisted, as a signal to any ship in the offing, to drop down into Waitoa harbour.

Nevertheless, some weeks elapsed before the anxiously watched-for sail appeared, and then it turned out that it was bound for California. It was a French vessel, and the captain of the "Belle Marie" would not alter his course, or promise to call at any port, and the good brethren of the mission would have persuaded Gilbert and his companion to remain with them till another and more favourable chance presented itself. But Gilbert, reflecting that it would be easier to communicate with home from San Francisco than from the Vavaos, determined upon taking passage in the "Belle Marie." He almost repented; when after being a week at sea he found out that the vessel was not in good condition, or properly manned; that her stores were scanty and half spoiled, and that the captain himself was of a surly, taciturn disposition, and on bad terms with his men. Indeed, as time passed on, and the brig made little way, and half rations began to be talked of, the evil feeling increased, and ere they were half way from Waitoa to San Francisco there were manifest symptoms of a mutiny.

The captain was alarmed, but, like many other foolish men in similar straits, he concluded to hold the reins of authority with a tighter hand; and since he confounded power with tyranny, and firmness with cruelty, it may be imagined that the most disastrous consequences were likely to ensue. And they would have ensued but for Gilbert's tact and heroism; though I must not tell that story; it would take too long, and if I once began it, I should not spare my readers a single incident or the veriest trifle of detail. Suffice it to say, that I am unspeakably proud of the part that Gilbert played on board the "Belle Marie;" and yet, when I recall the events of that long and dangerous voyage, I shudder to think of the perils he escaped, by a hair's-breadth, as it were; and I thank God, with beating heart and tearful eyes, for His merciful interposition, for His great goodness, in watching over my beloved friend, and bringing him in safety into the desired haven.

Arrived in California, Gilbert lost no time in despatching letters to England; but the whole package was lost, and never heard of more; postal arrangements with those far off regions were by no means as well established as they are in our own day. After some time spent in going up the country, Gilbert engaged himself on board a merchantman bound to New York, where in due time he arrived, and found, of course, plenty of English vessels ready to sail, according to advertisement. He chose one bound for Southam, and the rest of the voyage was accomplished with moderate speed, and without any fresh adventure. Crossing the Atlantic seemed no feat at all after all that beating about in Southern Seas, and after those fearful experiences in the Pacific. As Gilbert said, it was almost like the "Little Gipsy" skimming up and down the creek again, and even the fatal "Serrars" would no more be terrible to him.

Then I had all my story to relate, from my flight from Cleeve to my return from Mrs. Druce's house. I had to tell of Mr. Scott's kindness, of Mrs. Brown's motherly

solicitude and tenderness, of the services rendered so heartily and so courteously by my friends Messrs. Piccolo and Grand, of my various pupils, of my visit to St. Eldred's, and much more of the same kind. Gilbert was rejoiced to hear such happy tidings of little Mirrie, as he still called her. The news of her good fortune, though, had already reached him during his brief stay at the North Fort; and he wanted to know if she were as lovely, and as much like an angel-child as formerly? Will it be believed that, as he spoke, a spasm of the old jealousy shot through my heart? It is so difficult thoroughly to extirpate the noxious weeds that have been suffered to spread themselves unchecked for any period of time.

But it was not till the next day that he said, "Margaret, did you really tell me that your cousin Sibyl had married Mr. Saunderson, or have I dreamt it?"

"I did tell you so! I wonder you did not hear of it at St. Eldred's."

"I was there so short a time: we were all so much excited, and I had so many home questions to ask. Besides, we talked chiefly about you, Margaret, without reference to anybody else. It was only when I was hurrying away that I heard about Miriam Downing. But, my dear, you know I always thought it was my patron himself and not your humble servant whom Miss Crofton wanted. I would say that I wish her joy, only that I do not like unmitigated sarcasm. If I, to whom escape was possible, found the yoke too galling to be borne, how will she, who has made a life-long and far closer compact, endure the slavery? Margaret, I may tell you now that my position all those years was wretched, past belief. Not for all the gold in California—and they talk out there as if the precious metals were as plentiful and as attainable as coal and iron are with us—would I resume my post as heir to Mr. Saunderson. But for the old people, and also for some qualms of conscience which told me I was ungrateful to a man to whom I owed an excellent education, and whose intentions, as regarded my future, were most generous, I should

have relinquished my connection with him long before I did. Poor man! he made himself and me very miserable. I can, however, freely forgive him for all his little tyrannies and tempers towards myself; it is when I think of his conduct to *you*, and with regard to you, that I find it difficult to think of him with Christian charity. But oh, Margaret! how could you fancy that you served me, that you saved me from distress, by leaving me without a word—without a look of farewell, even? By what sophistry he deluded you I cannot think!"

Then I went again over the old ground, explaining how Mr. Saunderson had very plausibly shown me that I could not, as Gilbert's friend, hold him to an engagement which would deprive him of every advantage, and fling him back, far less fitted for the encounter than in old time, on his own resources. That out of very pity I could not reduce the poor old couple, and the delicate Alice, to their former straits. But Gilbert replied that he was ready then for any extremity, that he had confidence in his own powers, that he trusted in God to bless the efforts he was prepared to make for his father, and mother, and sisters; and, for myself, that I was wrong—altogether wrong in leaving him so rashly, and myself at the mercy of Mr. Saunderson's misrepresentations.

"Surely," I replied, "he would say no evil of me? Sibyl might, and would, I feared; but he!—I had yielded to him, I had given him the promise he required! Surely he would know that the only alternative I had was to go away, and hide myself from you. I felt sure that the severance must be my own work; I knew you would never give me up."

"You were right. Even when Mr. Saunderson assured me that you had told him you regretted your hasty promise and *wished* to be free, I did not believe it, and I refused to consider our engagement broken, though, from a sense of the obligations I was under to my patron, I told him that, if you consented, I was willing to let it remain an engagement only for an indefinite time, till he should feel differently on the subject, and give his consent to our marriage."

"Which, I dare say, he vowed should never be forthcoming."

"Exactly; and he charged me with waiting for his death —an event, he gravely assured me, at least five-and-thirty years distant, as he meant to live to be ninety!"

"He must take less port wine then, eat plainer food, and govern his temper."

"And in order to be quite sure that I should not 'throw myself away,' he endeavoured to extort from me a promise immediately to seek Sibyl as my wife; and he hinted pretty clearly that I should not be repulsed. Married to Sibyl, I should enjoy the utmost sunshine of his favour; an ample income should be settled upon me, and the house in town given up to me at once. I should travel if I liked, or rule at Tenterly, follow the hounds, or have my own yatch; or, as he phrased it, 'make a fool of myself in that fools' paradise, the literary world!'—in short, do anything and everything I chose, if only in this particular instance I would promise him obedience. I could only refuse as respectfully as I could, but in the most outspoken English; for it is not safe to talk to him in any other way, the chances being that he will misunderstand you, or pretend to do so, and swear that you have solemnly asserted that which you never intended to declare. It must be either black or white with Mr. Saunderson; no intermediate shades, no neutral tints will do for him. Of course, his rage was something alarming. I feared in his fury he would fatally hurt himself, for these tempests of passion to which he was liable were invariably followed by access of gout, and his medical men were most anxious that he should restrain himself. I could only leave him, for my presence without a word said in rejoinder seemed to exasperate him to the very verge of madness, and in absolute silence I parted from him and went away. But after the lapse of a few hours, when I thought he had had time to cool, I wrote him a long, kind letter, thanking him for his goodness to me, and for all the goodness I might have received from him. Had I not, of my own will and deed, forfeited his favour? I begged him to believe that I did not disobey him out of perversity, as he had so angrily affirmed; but that I could not, out of justice

to myself, as well as to you, act otherwise. And as it appeared to him that I was really to blame, I begged his forgiveness, not only in this instance, but in every other where we had differed since our first coming together: and though now I did not seek to reverse, or even to mitigate my sentence of disgrace and banishment, I trusted he would some day or other give me credit for being not *ungrateful*. And if ever he needed the help or comfort of a son, I entreated him to call me to his side, wherever I might be, and under whatever circumstances he might require me. And I pray heaven, my Margaret, that I may, before his death, be permitted to prove myself to him a grateful and affectionate son; that I may, in some small measure, repay him for all the real and most substantial benefits he showered upon me, especially for the educational advantages he afforded me and for the appointment of my father to the North Fort Residency, both of which blessings remain now that other and more brilliant expectations have passed away."

That evening I wrote to Mrs. Druce, telling her, in very incoherent fashion, I believe, what had occurred, and how thankful I was; and the very next afternoon, just as Gilbert and Bertha and I were sitting down to have another "good talk,"—in plain words, to go over it all again,—a carriage and pair drove up to the door, in a most tremendous bustle, while Mrs. Brown and Miss Smith prepared themselves to receive the most august of customers. I am not sure whether visions of "By Appointment to Her Majesty," as figuring henceforth under the Royal Arms, over the shop-window, in juxtaposition with the respectable name of "*Brown*," were not flitting through their brains. But neither queen nor princess alighted; only my cousin Leonora Druce and her sister Gussie; and they enquired for Miss Torrington, and were shown into the back parlour, where the Tredgolds and I, who had witnessed their arrival, were anxiously awaiting them. Nora's lovely face was radiant with delight, tears of joy were in her bright blue eyes, and her cheeks, from pleasurable excitement, were blooming like twin summer-

roses. As for Gussie, she behaved in so very demonstrative a style, that her sister looked half inclined to call her to order. Not content with nearly strangling me, and bestowing upon Bertha a most vigorous caress, she glanced at Gilbert, with unmistakeable signs of favouring him with similar attentions; but half bashfully she glanced at Mrs. Druce, and at length, after a moment's hesitancy, set us all laughing, by saying, with the utmost gravity, "*May I* kiss him, Nora?"

Nora nearly exploded into hysterics, and replied, as gravely as she could, "Really, Gussie, you must ask Margaret."

Then they appealed to me, but Gilbert settled the question by accosting her very heartily there and then, whereupon she burst into tears, and sobbed out something that no one could understand. Then Nora pretended to scold her, asking her if that was the way she intended to meet all her gentlemen acquaintances after a long absence?—that she should remember she was no longer a little girl, &c., &c. And Gussie, looking down rather mournfully at her long skirts, wiped her eyes, and replied, "It is only that I am so miserably tall, Nora. I am only fourteen, and I am sure children of fourteen may kiss any one they please. When I am grown up it will be different, of course; but I am not grown up yet, and I don't mean to be for this long time. It must be horrible to be a young lady 'come out,' and to have to study the proprieties! Gilbert, it is because Nora has put me in long dresses, and turned up my back hair, that I look so old, but I am just the same Gussie you used to know two years ago; indeed I am."

"I believe it, Gussie, dear," he said kindly, taking her long brown fingers in his own; "I believe you are just the same in goodness, and truth, and simplicity, but in many things much better than you were then."

"If there really be any good in me I owe it all to you," began Gussie, vehemently. But Gilbert interrupted her,—"Nay, Gussie, to One far higher than I. Besides, if influences are to be considered, there is Margaret."

"Yes. I owe more than anybody knows to Margaret. She humanised me. I was a little savage before she came, —before I learned to love her. But, Gilbert, you raised me above mere humanity; you taught me to look beyond the best of earthly friends. You showed me the *one Friend* who is above all others; you taught me to love *Him*. To you I owe all true happiness in this world and in that which is to come, for you showed me first the secret of peace—the way to heaven."

"Thank God, dear Gussie; it was He who really showed the way and led you into it: only He made use of me. It was a great honour that He put upon me, and I thank Him for it."

"Come," said Nora, with pretended impatience; "I am not going to stop here while Gussie and Mr. Tredgold make their confidences. I came with the express purpose of carrying you all three to dine with me. Margaret and Bertha, go and put on your bonnets; don't stay to change your dresses; you will see no one except Captain Druce, and perhaps my sister Agatha. We are going to have a snug, quiet evening to ourselves, and we shall not be 'at home' to anybody. So make haste. I am not particularly impatient, and Gussie is going to bring me a cargo of wools; but my horses are by no means meek quadrupeds, and they will resent being kept too long, as will also my coachman, who is invaluable in his way, but not at all an obsequious domestic. I sometimes think he falls into the fallacy of believing that mankind were created for horses rather than horses for mankind, so particular is he that all the animals' possible wants should be attended to, and all their whims respected. I verily believe if one of my carriage-horses trampled me to death, that man would be chiefly concerned lest the brute should have strained a sinew, or put himself into a fever. Girls, why do you not go and get ready? Mr. Tredgold will entertain me while Gussie does her shopping with the excellent Mrs. Brown."

We made a hurried toilet, but, woman-like, we did change our dresses and adorn ourselves a little, and we ran down, expecting to be scolded by Nora, scowled at by the coach-

man, and run away with in revenge by the insulted horses. But Nora was in the shop with Gussie, bewildering Mrs. Brown by the extravagances of her purchases. She actually bought a splendid *papier maché* ink-stand tray, fitted up regardless of expense, and a pair of green and gold vases that had been on hand ever since I came to King-street, chiefly, I suppose, because they were the highest priced articles in the shop. Mrs. Brown could scarcely believe in her good fortune, for she had been thinking she must reduce the figure, and sell these very "goods" at a dead loss. And meanwhile, Miss Smith was heaping up mountains of wool, and measuring off canvass, and contrasting shades of chenille. It was the busiest and decidedly the most profitable afternoon they had had for months. Such packages went into the carriage that I feared the coachman and the imperious quadrupeds would be affronted at the extra freight. However, "nothing happened," as we say, and in due time we arrived in Brook-street, where Captain Druce and the stately Agatha gave us all a very hearty welcome.

CHAPTER XLV.

A VISITATION.

OUT of consideration for our unfashionable habits, we had what Nora called an "early dinner;" that is, we sat down to table at six, while the rest of "society" was yet cozily chatting over its "early tea!" But, as soon as we had arrived, Nora rang for the children, and exhibited them with all a mother's pride. And certainly they were noble boys—only, to my ideas, the least bit rampant; and Nora gravely assured me that, in size, beauty, intelligence, and inherent virtues, the Druce babies infinitely excelled all others. "You should see Fanny's little girl," she added,—"so spoiled, so plain, such a little torment! She is always screaming, and struggling, and twisting herself about, as if her sole mission in this world were to exhibit an animated specimen of the letter S!"

"Perhaps she is not well, poor little thing!"

"Perhaps not! She is inferior in every way to my children; but there, they are Druces—and the Druces are all charming!"

"And, in the meantime, you must endeavour to have patience with those people who are unfortunate enough *not* to be born Druces."

"Don't be satirical, Margaret. I cannot bear satire in any one but myself. The Druces really are a splendid set; they are perfect in health, beauty, good temper, and common sense. As for my husband, he is the king of them all, the flower of all the flowers of the family—the very Koh-i-noor of Druces!"

"I am so glad to hear it, Nora—so glad that you are really happy!"

"Happy! Of course I am happy without Sibyl to plague me, with such promising babies, and with the best husband in the world! Margaret, he is a veritable darling! Nay, don't smile; I am not exaggerating;—he lets me do exactly as I like; he never contradicts me; if I sulk, he looks pensive; if I am cross, he pets me; if I want the moon, he tries to get it for me; he does just what I tell him to do, and he never does anything he knows I shall not like; also, he gives me as much money as ever I want! If I do not ask him for it, he holds it out to me with both hands till I am fain to cry '*Satis!*' And if that is not being a veritable darling, Margaret, I don't know what is! Why, if the soup were burnt to-day, and the whole dinner a failure, he would never say a word, bless him! I only hope Gilbert may be half such a saint as my Edgar!"

And I could only smile, thinking within myself that the "veritable darling" would not suit me at all. It would not please me to be the wife of a man who always did as he was told, and never stood upon his own dignity as a husband. I felt dreadfully afraid that if a man, reversing the natural position of the sexes when united for life, should sit for evermore humbly at *my* feet, I should be wicked enough to trample on him! But then I had a considerable portion of the

vixen in my nature, and I wanted a master to keep me in good order. I needed some one to reverence as well as love; some one of whom I should stand in awe if I felt inclined to misbehave myself. No, no! a tame specimen of the genus husband would never do for Margaret Torrington: and I am afraid she would have led poor Captain Druce a terrible life if he had the ill luck—the *very* ill luck—to own her as a wife.

Dinner was announced, and we sat down a very happy party of seven; and the soup was not burnt, nor the *entrées* spoiled, nor the *pièce de resistance* roasted to a cinder: so I had no opportunity of witnessing the gallant captain's amiability under misfortune. We were taking coffee in the drawing-room, and I had just promised Nora to play her favourite old pieces, and to sing "By the Sad Sea-waves," as soon as the gentlemen rejoined us, when we heard certain noises on the staircase evidently betokening an arrival. The door was open, for Nora's rooms were decidedly overheated that evening; so we could hear a curious thumping sound gradually ascending, and coming nearer to us; and I thought —but of course it was only fancy—that I heard a shrill voice I had heard last on that miserable morning at Cleeve-super-Mare.

"How provoking!" cried Nora, nearly upsetting her coffee-cup in her annoyance. "And I told Sanders I was 'not at home' to any one; I made no exception. Dear me, Gussie, what a curious noise! it must be Miss Kilmansegg herself coming to visit us.

'Hark! as slow as the strokes of a pump,
Lump, thump,
Thump, lump!
As the giant of Castle Otranto might stump.'

Agatha! I thought I heard Sibyl's voice. Surely—*surely* she is safe in Paris?"

All the fun and playful pettishness went out of Nora's voice as she fancied she discerned her sister's, and she looked as disconsolate as Niobe just transmuted, when Sibyl's thin treble made itself distinctly audible on the landing.

Agatha shivered, Gussie gasped, and gulped down her emotion at the imminent risk of choking herself, Leonora sank back in her chair the picture of helpless dismay and consternation; while we three from Bloomsbury sat still, not daring to exchange looks—two of us, at least, wishing ourselves anywhere but in a certain house in Brook-street. Captain Druce made his appearance, and was the only one who showed the least presence of mind. Mr. and Mrs. Saunderson were on the point of being announced, and they must be honourably received under the roof of their brother-in-law. So he met them at the door, and greeted them courteously, if not quite as cordially as he had welcomed us two hours before.

Yes; there they were,—the bride and bridegroom of last April!—the bride thinner than ever, her nose and chin sadly sharpened, her countenance generally giving one the idea that she had lived on *sauer-kraut* ever since her marriage, her once delicate complexion sallow, if not decidedly bilious, and her golden hair, which was combed back off her face in a fashion then unknown to Englishwomen of repute, dead, lustreless, and, if I mistake not, threaded here and there with silver. Sibyl Crofton had worn badly; she had become *passée* at an age when most women who are tolerably healthy are in their fullest bloom; but Sibyl Saunderson was positively haggard,—old and almost ugly. As for the bridegroom, he looked, I thought, very little altered, save that the rich purple was of a deeper shade, his *embonpoint* more striking, his lameness worse by twenty degrees, and his deafness so greatly increased that only by dint of shouting in his ear could you hope to make him understand one word of that you wished to say. And even then the conversation resembled the game which children call "cross questions and crooked answers."

"*You here!*" he roared, after a few leonine salutations had passed between him and the Druces. "You here, you scapegrace?" And he pointed his huge stick at Gilbert as if it were a rifle, and his quondam *protégé* a head of game, "Who told you to come here and meet me on my return, eh?"

"I invited Mr. Tredgold to dinner," returned Nora, haughtily. "I had no idea that we should be honoured with the company of Mr. and Mrs. Saunderson," she screamed, with her hand on her chest.

"You expected us to dinner, of course! It was all Mrs. Saunderson's fault. But you needn't elevate your voice, Mrs. Druce; I hear perfectly if you speak naturally, but distinctly. Yes, we were coming to dinner, but my wife chose not to be ready. However, she will be ready next time!"

And she really looked as if she would! Poor Sib!—she seemed as if all spirit were beaten or shaken out of her, as far as her husband was concerned. She had evidently played Kate to his Petruchio; and seven months of matrimony had taught her the wisdom of submission; but the old gleam was in her azure eyes,—as defiant, as coldly sparkling, as ever. Any one who thought to measure lances with Sibyl because she had perforce yielded to marital authority would find himself miserably deceived. Her accustomed weapons were all in fighting order—I saw that at a glance; and it was only to Giant Grumbo himself that she would strike her colours. Heaven knows what would have become of her had she refused to let her tyrant set his foot upon her neck, and keep it there! Perhaps she dimly guessed how matters might end if Petruchio were foiled, and so she made a virtue of necessity, and became a pattern of obedience.

"They told me you were drowned!" said Mr. Saunderson, again addressing Gilbert. "Who told him?" I wondered. "You were not drowned, I suppose, after all?"

"No, sir," returned Gilbert, gravely. "I am afraid if I had been drowned, you would not see me here to-night; but I was very near going to the bottom, and there were rumours which might have reached you."

"And pray, sir, how dare you allude to rumours? If my wife is a little younger than myself, what is that to any one? If you had married her, you would have had a wife a little older than yourself. I wish you had married her; that I do. She is a Tartar, a vixen, a shrew, a fool, a doll! We went

to a ball at the Tuileries, and some one asked who that elderly young woman with the skinny shoulders and the nut-crack nose and chin was! I have not much reason to be proud of my beautiful bride, have I? Now, if you had taken her I might have had Margaret Torrington! I like a woman with a spirit! I like a brave, frank, outspoken woman, who knows her own mind, and means what she says. I am sick of weak, scolding coquettes; poor cowards, who can torment their maids till they begin to think of suicide; vindictive Xantippes who can drown cats! Yes, ma'am, I said *cats!* You needn't frown; we all know here who drowned poor pussy! I was alluding to people who drowned cats in pump-troughs, and yet whined, and pined, and cried, and made abject promises, the first time they felt the weight of a lawful husband's hand."

Sibyl coloured violently, then turned deathly pale. No wonder her once fair face had lost its charms; it was perfectly distorted between the contending influences of passion and slavish fear. She kept silence, for her tyrant was watching her; and he seemed to keep her in order with his hard, staring eyes, as if he were a Bethlehem hospital keeper, and she a raging lunatic. But Leonora shrieked out—"You don't mean to say you beat her?—beat my sister?"

Mr. Saunderson did not hear, and Captain Druce signed to his wife not to repeat her question. But Gussie, hot, indignant, and in no wise afraid of Giant Grumbo, sprang to his side, and shouted in a clear, full, distinct voice, "Do you really mean that you *beat* Sibyl?"

"Of course I do," he replied with a chuckle. "However should I manage her without? Moral suasion does not answer with my dear Sibyl; so, being the senior, you know, my pretty Gussie, and, therefore, blending a husband's fondness with a father's wisdom, I use brute force. Nothing else will do, you see. Take my word for it, Captain Druce, when a woman is obstreperous there is nothing so useful, so easy, and, in the end, so kind, as a little physical coercion. It saves future fracas; it lets the lady see where you are, and where she is, at once; she knows her place, and learns

to keep it. Ah, nothing like a little wholesome discipline to begin with; and you know the old proverb, 'A woman, a spaniel, and a walnut-tree.'"

"Sir, you are a brute!" thundered Captain Druce, who was of so chivalrous a nature that his wife used to say he would give place to a scullery-maid with as good a grace as to a duchess, simply because she was a woman. And, with his most martial tread, the gallant gentleman strode out of the room, followed by his stately sister Agatha, who deemed herself compromised by remaining any longer in the vicinage of a man who actually boasted of beating his own wife.

But I will not pursue the conversation; our pleasant evening was completely spoiled, and it was only for Sibyl's sake that Nora refrained from unceremoniously requesting Grumbo to depart. Another hour the ill-matched pair stayed with us, Sibyl smarting continually under the oblique hints and sharp thrusts of her lord, yet never daring to give him one of those emphatic rejoinders for which she had been so famous in her maiden days; though I saw that, as the time passed on, and sneer succeeded taunt, and sarcasm followed after sneer, that her patience was on the eve of evaporating. Most devoutly I hoped they would go home before Sibyl was provoked to extremity; for who knew whether Mr. Saunderson might not think fit to administer "discipline" before us all; and then what could we do?—look on, or interfere? The former course would seem to be impossible, and the latter might occasion a real combat, a drawing-room tournament! And everybody knows that pugilistic frays are not *à la mode* at the West end, however they may delight some of the inhabitants of the opposite quarter of the metropolis! We were selfish, undoubtedly; but we were all very much relieved when Mrs. Saunderson's carriage was announced; and we rejoiced to think that, if a passage-at-arms were inevitable, it would be fought out in the abode of the combatants themselves.

But we were all greatly shocked, and, little as we loved Sibyl, we felt very sorry for her. Wretched as we imagined she would be, we had never anticipated anything like this.

We had pictured the ill-assorted pair living what is graphically called a "cat and dog life;" we were prepared for a speedy virtual, if not legal, separation between the two whom the clergyman had said God had joined together: but the idea of such humiliation as that to which the unhappy seven months' wife was subjected had never crossed our minds.

Captain Druce returned when his obnoxious visitor had departed. He laid his hand on his wife's shoulder, and said quietly, "Nora, my dear, I do not like your sister Sibyl; still, for your sake, and a little for her own, poor thing, I will receive her if she come here—that is, if she come alone; for I have already given orders to the servants never under any pretence to let that monster cross my threshold again! Do you approve?"

"Perfectly; but, oh, Edgar! can nothing be done?"

"Nothing, my love. Sibyl has chosen her own lot, and she must abide by it. Nothing is more fruitless, more certain to recoil on one's self, than interference between married persons. Husband and wife must settle their own differences, and if a third party have a voice in the affair, it should be a legal one. Do not think me heartless, Nora, but nothing can be more Quixotic than friends stepping in between such unnatural belligerents as those who have just left us."

"But Sibyl must leave him, Edgar; and if she should come to us, surely you would protect her?"

"I cannot. A wife is her husband's property, and he may claim her under a legal process if she leave him and refuse to return. No one would have the right to detain her. I might as well try to keep Gussie from her father as Sibyl from her husband. No, my dear; people should think well before they forge for themselves such fetters, seeing they are indissoluble in this life. If one can be sure of the silken bands of love, one would infinitely prefer captivity to freedom, of course; but if chains of iron may reasonably be looked for, it would be well to pause. Now, Sibyl never could have indulged in love's young dream; she could have had no fairy visions of 'silken cords' and 'precious links;' she must have known from the beginning that her bonds

would be of heavy iron, but, as they were tolerably gilt, she did not care for that. Now the gilding is wearing off, and the weight of her chains is more than she can bear."

"Poor Sibyl!" said Nora, sighing deeply, for she felt the truth of her husband's utterance; and "Poor Sibyl!" was echoed by us all, not in scornful pity, but in deepest, most genuine compassion.

The next thing we heard was that Mr. Saunderson had a fit of the gout, and that no one would go near him save his wife, who attended on compulsion. He could not rise and chastise her when she failed to please him, and she had grown an adept in dodging round his chair and evading his "discipline," as he called it; but it transpired afterwards that, in the course of the fortnight during which her liege lord was confined to his chamber, she had had everything thrown at her that came within his grasp, from a small table to a cup of barley-water. And as for abuse, that was showered upon her till she became perfectly callous, and cared not whether she were called an angel or something very different. The next time she saw Nora—and it was by stealth—she shrugged her shoulders, and declared that now she was quite as familiar with bad language as with French.

But our next tidings of Sibyl were sadder still; they were such tidings as Nora kept from Gussie's ears, and whispered only to me. Edgar had heard her name spoken lightly at the clubs, and there was but too much reason to believe that her own imprudence had justified the liberty. Nora immediately, by her husband's desire, went to see her sister, and talked very earnestly to her, provoking, however, only fierce rejoinders and flippant repartee. After that day, Mrs. Saunderson and Mrs. Druce met only as mere acquaintances. But I am anticipating; this trouble befel in the next year, when many other events were coming to pass.

For several weeks Gilbert was going up and down between Southam and London; for he naturally had business to transact with the owners of the "Ellerslie." They were much pleased with him, and expressed their satisfaction in a very substantial way; and finally they offered him a berth

as first mate in a splendid vessel of theirs, sailing from St. Katharine's Docks in the February of next year. He would have been captain but for his youth; that post might, however, be his, they hinted, on his next voyage. And in the meantime we resolved to spend our Christmas at St. Eldred's. Bertha was anxious to see her family again, and I was longing to behold that well-beloved shore in all its wintry ruggedness, and to see once more the hills behind North Combe in the snowy robes they usually wore in the early weeks of the new year. So we went down, carrying with us sundry hampers, containing such Christmas cheer as is to be had most plentifully in London markets; and we reached North Fort on Christmas-eve, and found the dear old people nearly beside themselves with joy, while even the placid Alice could scarcely keep her happiness within bounds. As for Bertha, she was wildly elate; and Gilbert, though quiet, and even grave, was, I knew, more than perfectly content. I understood him better than any one, and I knew that under that calm exterior were depths of truest feeling, and bliss and gratitude too full "for words upon their stream to bear."

We had a blessed Christmas-day, calm, and bright, and mild for the season, and we all went to church in the morning and heard Dr. Berners preach; and once again the holly and the laurel were wreathed about the pillars and round the font and pulpit; and I thought of that day six years ago, when Clara Berners and Mirrie and I had worked at the decorations. And now Clara was in her grave, and Mirrie was far away; one at least of that little company comprehended now the full mystery of the Cross, and the glory of the Crown! I felt almost sad, amidst my joy, thinking of that day, that seemed so long ago; and of Clara's brightness and goodness, lost so early to those who loved her best. For Clara was a young wife when she died, and she took with her to the better land a tiny babe, who just looked upon the light, and closed his eyes, to open them again in the brighter day that never ends in darkness.

In the evening we sat round the hearth, and talked, and talked; and then a proposition was made that startled me

just a little. Gilbert was to sail in February, and he wished to make me his wife before he went away. He had said something about it before, but I scarcely thought him in earnest. Now, however, backed by his father's and mother's entreaties, and his sisters' persuasions, he became so importunate that it was impossible to say him "nay."

Well, perhaps I did not altogether wish to say it. Anyhow, when we went to bed that night, the wedding was fixed for the 15th of January.

CHAPTER XLVI.

MY WEDDING TOUR.

When I had thought about my wedding-day, as all girls do, I suppose, now and then, I had pictured to myself a glorious June morning, the roses in full bloom, flowery wreaths on all the hedges, and star-like blossoms on the mossy banks. I had fancied a blue and cloudless sky, soft sunshine on the woods and fields, and the silver-chiming waves breaking lightly on the shore in little sparkling showers of pearly spray. Yes! my wedding-day was to be warm, and bright, and beautiful; and, lo! it was cold and flowerless, and the snow lay thick and white upon the hills; keen blasts blew fiercely from the east, and the dark waves swept the weed-strewn shingle with a mournful, soughing sound.

When Susan Pratten came to call me, on the morning of that eventful 15th of January, I was already up and dressing; but my fingers were so benumbed I could scarcely make the temporary toilet in which I intended to go down and take the ordinary breakfast. But Susan brought me hot water, and helped me, and scolded me all the while for not sleeping till the proper time; but finished up by saying, "Ah, well! I suppose people feels a little queer on their wedding-morning. And no wonder! it must be something like jumping into the sea in just such weather as this, and not being sure how deep the water is! You may get a nice bracing bath, though it is a shock; or you may go over

head and ears, and never come up again alive. You know I never had any great opinion of matrimony, Miss Margaret."

"I know, Susan: you used to favour us with some of your maxims at Kelver House, and my dear mother used to laugh at you, and say you preferred a single life chiefly because you were afraid of not having your own way in all things."

"Well, Miss Margaret, and my dear and lamented mistress was not far wrong. I honoured and obeyed my father and my mother when I was a little one, as the Scriptures taught me, and I always submitted myself to 'all my teachers, spiritual pastors, and masters,' as the catechism said, and I tried to serve my masters according to the flesh, in singleness of my heart as unto Christ, as St. Paul bids servants do; but, thinks I, the Bible says 'Wives, submit yourselves unto your own husbands, as unto the Lord.' Mark that, Miss Margaret!—'*as unto the Lord.*' So, thinks I again, I have been obeying and submitting all my life long, and I am come to years of discretion, and it is time I was my own mistress. If I have a husband I *must* obey him, but if I keep single I need obey nobody. And really, now, if a duke was to ask me, I don't think I should say 'Yes' to him. But then every woman isn't strong enough to stand alone."

And all this while Susan was pouring out for me a delicious cup of coffee, and stirring the fire, and adjuring me to eat a good breakfast, or I should never be able to go through the ceremony, which seemed, according to her showing, to be about as pleasant and as trying to the nerves as a public execution. Presently she began again,—

"Now, Miss Margaret, you must not go for to expect too much. Men will be men, you see; and *naturally* they are very troublesome and tiresome creatures: they'll none of 'em be driven but the very soft ones that are good for nothing, and some of 'em will neither be druv nor led—no, nor coaxed, they're so rampaging. There's poor Mrs. Clay, in Tower-street, she never can do anything with her husband,

he's that unreasonable; he's always coming home in a bad temper because of the drink, and —"

"Stop, Susan, please! These reviews of married life are far from agreeable; and I do not see how the mention of Mrs. Clay's intemperate husband can affect my case. Gilbert Tredgold is a Christian man; or, much as I love him, I would not trust him: we may have troubles, and we may both disappoint each other in some things; but we both have a rule of life that will keep us from doing and saying much that might otherwise be said and done to cause unhappiness."

"Well, there is that, Miss Margaret. Being a Christian makes a good deal of difference; but not all, my dear—oh, dear, no! I have known Christian men very plaguing and fractious."

"And have you not known very unamiable Christian women? And do you not think they may sometimes try their husband's temper? I fancy, Susan, in all relations of life, we must expect some imperfections, and there will be faults on both sides. You know the old adage, 'Bear and forbear?' It is hackneyed enough, I confess; but it is singularly wise. Indeed, Susan, I will try to do my duty, and I am not afraid; we love each other truly, and I think we have God's blessing. It would not do for all the world to follow your example."

"Well, no; I suppose not. I am an old fool, I dare say; but I can't help having a fling at matrimony every time I have the chance."

"If you were younger, Susan, I should expect to hear of your doing some very foolish thing. People are so apt to rush from one extreme to the other."

"I dare say! But I shall be fifty-two next month, and that's rather too late to change one's condition; and, if nobody fancied me when I was young and comely, it's not likely they will now."

"But you don't mean, Susan, that no one ever fancied you."

"I saw at once that I had asked an indiscreet question,

for Susan's brow clouded, and she turned round evidently in a little huff; but after a moment or two she replied—"There! it's the truth, so I'll say it, though you needn't go for to tell upon me, Miss Margaret! I never did have what you call a regular offer. Only once Jemmy Clews, that goes off his head every full moon, asked me to be his sweetheart; but he was very mad at the time, and if he asked one, he asked a score of girls that afternoon to marry him, and I wasn't the first, so I don't think that can count! And once since I began housekeeping, the head waiter at the hotel would walk home from church with me one afternoon, and he says—'Miss Pratten, I'm leaving our house, and I'm a-going to set up for myself in the public line, and I shall want a wife. Can you recommend one, not too young, with a little money saved up, and some good furniture of her own?' 'So you are there, master,' thinks I; and I says, 'No, I can't, Mr. Jones; and I wouldn't if I could, for I hate all public houses, and I wouldn't have aught to do with one if it was to keep me from starving! So he bowed, and said that was very unkind of me, and at the corner of the lane he wished me 'good afternoon.' Now, I believe he really *meant* to propose, as people say, only I took him up so short; but he didn't, so I can't count him. And that's all the love-making I ever had, Miss Margaret; but it would be just the same if I had had scores of offers. I really wish I had, for then I should have proved my principles; as it is, I can only bring up Sally with proper views of matrimony. She's never to be married, and I shall leave her all I have. When I see a wedding pass, I shake my head and say, 'There they go, poor things!' And that's why I've sent her to her father's relations now. I did not like her to see you married, because she thinks so much of you, and it might put foolish notions in her head about her own turn coming some day, and all that nonsense. Sally's growing up just as I wish her, I am glad to say, and she'll be a comfort to me in my old age, and be a steady-going respectable old maid!"

Poor Susan! And I knew that at that very moment Sally

had a tenderness for a young baker in the next street, and would certainly not elect to be a spinster of her own free will. And here I may as well say that the baker, being an artful man, carried his point, and wedded Sally triumphantly and with her aunt's consent.

I felt rather depressed when Bertha and Alice came, for Susan's conversation was not exactly inspiriting; and I wished it were not so freezing cold, and that the sea would look a little brighter, and the sun shine out. Decidedly it is not pleasant to be married when the snow is on the ground.

But the two girls cheered me wonderfully. Bertha's brightness infected me, and Alice's quiet caress seemed to calm and strengthen my heart. I was soon dressed, and then I begged to be left alone for a little while, till it was time to go to church, that I might once more ask God's blessing on the step I was going to take. I thought of my own parents, and I was sure that if they had lived they would have given me to Gilbert with all their hearts. If only it might be that Gilbert and I should be happy as they were, good and wise as they were, and loved and honoured half as well, our future life, whatever cares and trials might beset us, would be a blessed one. And in their deaths they were scarcely divided. Therein, also, I hoped we should resemble them.

We were married at the old church on the hill-side, and the holly-wreaths were still in all their glory; and again came over me many sad yet precious memories—the day when Mirrie, and Clara, and I, had been so busy among the evergreens; and the fair July Sabbath, when, for the last time, my father and mother had knelt together at the table of the Lord, when Mirrie and I had watched the quiet worshippers from our hiding-place aloft. And again I thought of that prayer, which then I heard for the first time,—the prayer "for the whole state of Christ's Church militant here on earth," and especially of that "thanksgiving lay," "And we also bless Thy holy name, for all Thy servants departed this life in Thy faith and fear, beseeching Thee to give us grace so to follow their good

examples that with them we may be partakers of Thy heavenly kingdom."

Also I thought of other days, when the bell was tolling, and a band of mourners stood at the "lych-gate," waiting till the white-robed priest should meet them with those words of holy cheer, "I am the resurrection and the life, saith the Lord: though he were dead, yet shall he live: and whosoever liveth and believeth in me shall never die." And now that was all over! Clara, and my parents, and Mirrie's mother, were all sleeping in their quiet graves—Clara in the solemn gloom of the ancient chancel, and my father and mother and Mrs. Downing in the fair churchyard without, lying on the snowy hill-side, under the shadow of the grey old walls I loved so well. And a new life was dawning for me—new hopes, new fears, new happinesses; but it all was like a dream: and even when Gilbert placed the ring upon my finger, and the irrevocable words pronouncing us to be "man and wife together" were spoken, it was the past that seemed most real—the present, as yet, I could scarcely comprehend. But when the service was over, and the book signed, and my dear husband took my arm in his, and walked with me down the well-known aisle as if he were very proud of his newly-acquired treasure, I began to feel something of the full joy and blessedness that God had given me. Henceforth there was one on whom I could lean; one on whom I had the right to rely, so far as one may rely on earthly supports; one who would be to me all and more than they had been whom I had lost awhile. And as, going towards the gate, we passed those graves folded so softly in the pure white shroud that hid the green grass and the sleeping flowers below, the sun shone out from a rift in the grey canopy above; a ray of golden light flashed itself across the leaden sea, and by-and-by, ere we reached the bottom of the hill, the clouds were rolling fast away, the waves were dancing in the clear brightness of the January morning, and every branch and spray, beautifully frosted, showed like jewelled arabesques against the intense blue sky. The snow itself glistened as with millions of crys-

tals, the tide came in with a full swell like the deep notes of a *Jubilate*, and the bells were ringing a merry peal, for Dr. Berners himself had set the ringers on.

We had no grand wedding party; we went home to the North Fort, and had an early dinner. Yes! really *a dinner!* We were bold enough to call it so, though we might have styled it breakfast, or even luncheon; and soon afterwards Gilbert and I went away to Bristol, where we meant to spend several days before going on to Cotswoldbury to pay the Norths a visit. Nothing seemed stranger to me than to see "Mrs. Tredgold" on my luggage, where "Miss Torrington" had been in all my former journeys; however, I supposed I should get used to it, and answer to my new name in time, and take kindly to all my dignities, privileges, and duties as a married woman.

I wondered where Cecilia was; and when we were crossing College-green on our way from the cathedral, on the second day after our arrival, I confided to my husband that I should very much like to see an old friend of mine, if only I could find her. Also, I told him how good she had been to me in my hour of need, and how she had promised to do her utmost for me at any time, and under any circumstances, if I would write to her or seek her; and how I fully believed in her sincerity.

So we resolved to look for her, and to that intent we called on Mr. Churchman, and were shown into the metamorphosed drab drawing-room. Of course Cecilia's papa could give us her new address. It was some time before any one appeared, and we were beginning to think the servant had not carried our message, or that the reverend gentleman, absorbed in the composition of next Sunday morning's sermon, had forgotten that visitors had been announced.

We were getting quite tired of waiting, and I had looked all through Cecilia's album, which lay on the table with other properties of hers, as in old time, when we heard voices in the conservatory, which was an addition to the room since the drab-coloured Mrs. Churchman's reign. The voice was

certainly Cecilia's own, – loud, full, and clear; perfect in its accent, but rather masculine—some people said *boisterous*—notwithstanding! And we heard distinctly these words, addressed to some unknown personage, possibly the "archangelic darling:"—"Tredgold! Tredgold! Mr. and Mrs. Tredgold! Never heard of such people. What do they come boring here for, I wonder? New parishioners? I know they are not. I dare say they are just converted from the errors of the Papacy, the pair of them! and they are *persecuted*, and want papa to help them with a handsome subscription to something or other! He is always being preyed upon—the poor, dear, simple, credulous man. Eh! what! *Torrington*, did you say? Are you sure? Why, by all that's glorious, it must be my pearl Margaret. Let me go, I say; never mind the petunias. Where are they, the pearl and—*the oyster?*" The answer I could not hear, but the next sentence was audible enough—"In the drawing-room! There I am, caught again! Why they must have heard every syllable. I vow I never will chatter in the conservatory more. Come along. I say you *must* come. I won't have the petunias touched again to-day. Now! *do you hear?*"

The next minute the glass door, which was already ajar, flew wide open with a bounce, and Cecilia herself, very handsome and matronly-looking, very much flushed, and attired in unexceptionable morning costume, but with her hair all tumbled about her shoulders, and the dirtiest hands imaginable, ran into the room and rushed at me with an energy that almost upset me into the arms of a mild-countenanced young man who followed her, and who, I felt at once, must be the "archangelic darling."

"Oh, you darling!" cried Mrs. Cecilia, rapturously. "Oh, you wretch! never to write to me or say a word! You never told me you were glad Eustace and I were married, and you have set up a husband for yourself, and never made a *confidante* of me, though once upon a time we *did* swear eternal friendship. Ah, *perfide! ingrate!* This, then, is the '*something*' you admitted that night we talked together, when I told you about my own affairs?"

And she poked a garden-trowel which she had been flourishing about my head all this time, at Gilbert. "This is your husband, of course? Well, this is mine!" And she hauled the archangelic creature forward and presented him, all blushing and confused, but certainly rapturously happy, to myself and Gilbert.

"Yes," said this archangelic specimen, "I am Mrs. Harford's husband." At what remote period he could have been an *habitué* of theatres, or offended the Reverend Peter Churchman by playing at cards, I could not imagine; a milder, more docile-looking human adult male I never beheld,—precisely the man whom you would expect to find reading to the ladies at a Dorcas party, and threading their needles, and quoting Dr. Watts, or, if he were in love, "L.E.L.," but in no wise outraging the opinions of his friends, either in practice or in principle. As for being a High Churchman, the thing seemed incredible; only as it struck me afterwards, Cecilia herself, out of sheer perversity, and in opposition to the training she had received, was amiably inclined that way, and of course the gentle Eustace followed in her wake, and was ready to believe exactly as she believed, and to profess himself of any creed his bride might choose.

Presently the gentlemen went into the garden, and then Cecilia told me how she had coaxed her papa into consenting to her marriage, and how they had decided to live with him; "because you know, my dear," she said, "another drab-coloured, or otherwise sad-coloured, woman might have taken possession of him; and I really think it is not respectable for a clergyman to marry three times! Besides, I didn't want any one but myself to be mistress here; and here we are as happy as two doves; and Eustace thinks I am the handsomest, cleverest, and best woman in the world; and he is, as I told you, the most archangelic pet!"

Yes, "*pet*" was about the best word she could have used, in reference to her bland, meek, obedient young husband; but I was glad to think that Gilbert was made of sterner stuff. I might call him "pet" now and then, if he were

very good, and no one by to hear me; but as to proclaiming him to the world under such a character, I should as soon have thought of calling him a monkey. I am afraid Mrs. Harford thought me very cold-hearted because I did not extol my husband's virtues to the skies, and protest how much I loved him; but such demonstrations were not in my way. I only said I was quite satisfied with Gilbert, and that I hoped, with God's blessing, to be extremely happy, while she launched out again into extravagant praises of her Eustace, who, she triumphantly averred, "had not a thought apart from her, nor the least will of his own."

This was far worse than Captain Druce, whose uxorious tendencies, by-the-bye, Nora greatly exaggerated; for he could be fussy enough when he chose, only the two, being so thoroughly alike in habit and disposition, scarcely ever came into antagonism.

I asked Gilbert as we were going down the hill what he thought of Cecilia's model husband, and he replied wickedly, "My dear, I should say he has been brought up on milk, rose-water, and sponge-cakes; while she must have imbibed champagne and curries from her earliest childhood. It remains to be seen how such utter incompatibility of character will answer. Euthusiastic people are easily disgusted, and weak minds are apt to degenerate into fretfulness and vapid remonstrances. I am very glad you are more reticent, more subdued I may say, than Mrs. Harford."

"And I am very glad, my dear Gilbert, that you are not 'archangelic.'"

Another day, and we were on our road to Cotswoldbury. Ah! the last time I had seen those hills, then rich in the late autumn colouring of foliage and atmosphere, now ribbed and ridged with winter snow, which had melted from the valleys, but still lay pure and sparkling on the bleak Woldscote uplands! There was the dingy station, and there were the fair terraces and crescents of the clean, bright town, smiling in the sunshine; and there, as the train stopped, nearly all the household from the Palace of Content. "The tin-box man,—"I beg his pardon, *the Professor*,—stouter

than of yore, but with bushier beard, and hair more tumbled than ever; and, oh! the way he strode along the platform! looking, I am certain, just like one of Ossian's ghosts; only there never was a Scandinavian ghost half so good, or half so true and genial as my dear old friend, "William North, Esq., F.L.S., F.S.A., F.G.S., as the press had it when it reported his papers as read at scientific gatherings.

And there was sweet Mrs. North as pretty and charming as of old; and Hetty, grown nearly out of knowledge; and Willy, "a regular pickle," as his papa called him; and wee Johnny, who was the baby when first I knew the family; and the fat dumpling, Marian; and the new baby, Maggie, my own little namesake, wonderfully wide-awake, and ridiculously like her father. We chartered the Plough omnibus on the spot, and drove away to the Palace of Content.

CHAPTER XLVII.

GOING HOME.

WE spent a very pleasant week with the Norths, and, to my great surprise, I received during my stay at Maple Cottage a stiff letter from my uncle; to whom I had written, as a mere matter of form, the day after my marriage. He neither reproved me nor congratulated me on the step I had taken; he was evidently glad to have me well off his hands, or, rather, off his conscience, for on his hands I had not been since my abrupt withdrawal from his guardianship. He thought, however, that as I was now married, my business affairs might as well be settled at once, especially as I was so nearly of age; he therefore desired me to call, with my husband, on his lawyer, and take legal possession of the property which I inherited from my father.

Of course we lost no time in paying this visit, and we found accordingly all things in proper order, and my £400 swelled by accumulated interest, which my uncle was so generous as not to touch, into £500. This money, a few

jewels, some rather antiquated articles of plate—family heir-looms—a very tolerable library, a little furniture, which Susan Pratten had had in keeping for me, and my own hard-earned grand pianoforte, was all the fortune I took with me to my husband. Nevertheless, it was much more than Gilbert had expected: he knew nothing about the £400, or, if he had heard me speak of it casually, he had for-gotten; he really believed that "my heart and lute were all my store," that is to say my heart and my beautiful new *Broadwood!* So that when we went back to London with our wealth, we thought ourselves quite rich people. Gussie had returned to Cotswoldbury, but we saw Nora pretty frequently, and Captain Druce and Gilbert became great friends, so that it was only natural that their wives should spend much of their leisure together. Also those rumours touching poor Sibyl, of which I spoke in a former chapter, began about this time to be bruited about, and even before Gilbert left England we had heard much that made us feel uncomfortable and ashamed.

For the middle of February was near at hand, and Gilbert would have to join his ship, which was under sailing orders for the 16th. How my heart quailed at the prospect of that farewell! and how swiftly the days passed by after the second month of the year had actually set in! We had agreed that I should still remain in my old quarters; only I had a sitting-room to myself, a large, cheerful, first-floor room overlooking the street, and allowing plenty of space for my piano. I was to go on with my pupils, too; for, after all, our income was rather an insignificant one; and there were the dear ones at St. Eldred's to be cared for. Besides, it would be better that in my husband's absence I should have some regular occupation. If I had to sit with my hands before me, or practise only for my own pleasure, I felt that I should very soon go crazy. It was actually imperative that I should find plenty of work; and as pupils crowded upon me, and I could command my own terms, it was certainly the most sensible thing I could do to return to my old calling, which I had, in fact, never abandoned, though

I had given a longer vacation than is generally permitted to music mistresses, even if they are fortunate enough to spend their holidays in getting happily married. Nora wanted me to come out to the West-end, but of course I could not think of such a change. It would have unsettled all my plans, besides being out of the way of many of my pupils also. It costs infinitely more to live in Belgravia and its vicinity, than in Bloomsbury; the last objection being insurmountable, and sufficient in itself to prevent me from committing myself to any rash procedure.

Well! day after day passed, oh! how rapidly! and soon it came to our last evening in King-street. The "Caroline" would be dropping down the river to-morrow, and Gilbert must be at his post.

"Cheer up, little woman," he said, as I was sitting looking into the fire after tea, and thinking of storms and shipwrecks, and especially of Captain Nicholson's death, and his lonely grave at Rara; "this voyage is not so long nor so dangerous as the last. The spring is at hand, and then the summer will come, and you must go down to St. Eldred's again; and as soon as ever the leaves begin to change colour, you may begin to think of my return. In November at the latest I hope to be at home." Then I was very foolish, and, instead of trying to strengthen my husband to go through what was as much of a trial to him as to me, I laid my head on his shoulder, and cried passionately, declaring that I could not let him go.

"But I must go, my love," was his quiet answer. "I owe it to my employers to go, and nothing now would induce me to disappoint them. Margaret, you are a sailor's wife, and you must be *brave*. I shall be doing my duty. God can guard me as entirely on the sea as on the land. He is in the tempest as well as in the calm, darling. Remember that, and do not let me carry away such sad reminiscences of our last evening."

But I cried on like a silly girl; I had allowed myself to become hysterical, and all the tears I had repressed of late years seemed now on the eve of being poured forth in one

overwhelming deluge. Weeping can generally be controlled at the outset, that is, if you are in tolerably good health; but give the passion of tears its full vent for a very little time, and your sobbing and crying gets the better of you, and continues till your physical strength is quite exhausted. Gilbert was infinitely distressed when he saw that I was not to be comforted, only he had not the heart to scold me as I deserved, though a good rating was the very thing I wanted to make me reasonable. I had it, however, fortunately for my own peace of mind afterwards, for I should have bitterly reproached myself had I spent all those precious hours in vain and selfish lamentation, doing myself no good, but sadly grieving and disappointing my husband, who had many things to say to me before we parted, things that I felt, as soon as I was left alone, I would not for the world have missed. It was from quiet Mrs. Brown that my scolding came. It was not the first she had given me, I must say; and her reproofs were always salutary. She saw at a glance how matters were, and she took my hand and said, "My dear, do you wish at once to go to bed and to be unable to rise to-morrow when Mr. Tredgold is leaving us? You are very unkind to him; you are giving him needless pain and anxiety; and I really thought you were more sensible than most girls." And a great deal more the old lady added in the same strain, always insisting on my great unkindness to Gilbert; till I began to feel very much ashamed of myself, and to struggle very hard to force back the tears and sobs that would burst out again as fast as ever I repressed them.

The evening ended, however, more happily than it began, and after awhile I could listen quietly to all that Gilbert had to say, and answer him with tolerable though enforced composure, and before bed time I felt cheered and comforted, and, oh! so sorry that I had been, even for an hour, a hindrance rather than a help-meet to my husband. For he was going to his duty, he was simply taking the path that Providence had marked out for him, yet he was leaving behind him all that he held most dear, and the struggle

was no slight one, and he needed my help to the full as much as I did his. The very first time I was proved in my new condition of wifehood I had lamentably failed.

Yet, thank God! only for a little while, only to a certain degree. Perhaps I had relied too much on my own strength, too much on my own inherent courage, on which I valued myself not a little. I only wondered at my own selfishness and weakness afterwards. The last thing that night we read our favourite psalm, and trusted, though with painfully beating hearts, that once again God would bring us to our desired haven, even here on earth. And, strange to say, while Gilbert was putting away the Bible and looking to the fire before we went up stairs, I carelessly and without much thought took down from the shelves a book which had once been my mother's—a Scottish metrical version of the Psalms—and it was at the 107th Psalm that I opened, while my eyes fell at once upon these verses:—

"The storm is changed into a calm,
At His command and will,
So that the waves which raged before,
Now quiet are and still.

"Then are they glad, because at rest,
And quiet now they be;
So to the haven He them brings,
Which they desire to see."

It was a mere trifle, I know; but those quaint lines gave me an inexpressible comfort; they seemed a sort of pledge that that which I so greatly dreaded should not come to pass; they seemed to promise me that my husband should return in joy and comfort: and I showed them to him and told him how I interpreted their simple meaning! He smiled, and said, "Yes; take it so, my dear: but commit your way and my way to the Lord, and trust that it will be well with us. I do firmly believe, my Margaret, that God will bring me back to you. But, if not, if it be His will to separate us, He knows best, and it will be but for awhile! There is another world than this, darling, where there is 'no more sea.' And there, after all, is the haven, the blessed haven we are longing to attain, the city of our God,

where all is peace, and bliss unspeakable. Only we must do our work here first, we must not cry out for rest before the evening; we must be content to go on toiling and waiting, and sorrowing, perhaps. For we are sure that in the world we *must* have tribulation; *One* has said it who knows well the discipline we need, till the end shall come, and God shall call us home."

The next morning all was bustle; I think both of us made ourselves as busy as possible. There would be plenty of time afterwards, I thought, for "giving way," as people call it. So I ran upstairs and down, and packed the portmanteau and the carpet-bag with my own hands—all the other luggage had gone on a day or two before—and I concerned myself about an elaborate meal, half late breakfast, and half early luncheon, which I was pretty sure neither of us would touch. And so we talked of indifferent things, and kept up a show of cheerfulness almost to the last minute.

I saw a cab drive up to the door, and the maid came in and carried down the packages; then I knew the terrible moment was come. Gilbert did not delay: he set aside his coffee-cup, and took up his great coat and then laid it down again, and for several moments I was folded closely in his arms; but he did not speak. At last he said hurriedly and low, "God bless you, my darling, my wife! For my sake be brave! As soon as ever I have sailed, begin to think of my coming back again; let me find my own bright, happy Margaret, when I return."

He was gone, and I was alone, almost before I knew I had lost the support of the strong arms that had been around me; and I was sitting on the sofa, half unconscious, and yet, strange as it seems to say so, fully alive to the anguish of the moment. I had one look more from the window before the cab drove away: then all was over, and I could conscientiously indulge myself in the luxury of floods of tears.

But the next day I reflected that tears and weeping would not bring my husband home again. This was, doubtless, the trial of my faith—a sharper one than I had yet endured; and I must be *strong*, and trust my dearest love in the hands

of One who had ever proved Himself to me a tender and most loving Father. Ah! we are wayward, foolish children; and we have to learn the same lesson over and over again. We are terrified at rising clouds; we shrink, we tremble, and our hearts grow faint within us; and, lo! God *undertakes* for us; by ways and means we never looked for deliverance comes, or else the evil that seemed swooping down upon us goes another way, and we are saved even from the scorching of the flames that we thought would utterly consume us. And we rejoice in our great and good Deliverer, and praise His mighty Name! yet when, after a season of calm, we hear again the distant thunder, we are cowards, and forget the lovingkindnesses gone by; and there is the same ground to go over again.

When once I began to work steadily, I had scant leisure for fretting; and I was surprised, after the first week of my solitude, to find how rapidly the time flew by. The winter was over, and the April showers were falling, when as yet it seemed but a few days since Gilbert and I parted; and Easter brought me a new care, a fresh anxiety, that diverted my mind from dwelling too continually on the dangers of the deep.

Miriam Downing came up to town with her uncle for medical advice. She had been very unwell all through the winter; the spring, though a mild one, was trying her; and the country doctors whom she had seen had all looked grave, and hinted that symptoms of consumption were developing themselves, and she must try a warmer climate.

Mr. King, terrified for his darling, brought her up to Portland Place forthwith, and the most eminent physicians in London were summoned to a consultation. Their verdict was the same as that recorded by their humbler brethren in the country: "Consumption, and that of a very rapid kind, had actually set in," they said. "The complaint must have its way; it was only *a question of time!*" "A question of years or months?" asked poor Mr. King, as he saw his treasure melting away in his fond embrace; and the answer was unhesitatingly given—"No; a question of months or

weeks. Your niece, my dear sir, will probably remain with you till the end of the summer,—that is, if the fatal month of May do not try her too severely."

"Can nothing be done?" gasped the unhappy man. "I have great wealth; nothing need be spared. I would fee a thousand physicians to save her life. Shall I take her to Italy?"

"My dear sir," was the reply, "she would only die there, far away from home. Do not take her there unless she wish it. For alleviation—for change, we will say—try the air of Devon or of Cornwall. But do not thwart her in the smallest trifle; let her have her own way; let her be indulged in every wish."

No need to tell him that! He would have given half his fortune to please his child at any time; now, I believe, he would cheerfully have given his life to afford her the least gratification. But Mirrie never seemed to want or to wish for anything. She was so happy, she said, and she lived the life of a fairy princess. Surely her uncle divined her very thoughts, for all that she could possibly care for came before she knew she wanted it. But something at last she did wish for: she wished for me! She said more than once, "I wish Margaret were here oftener." I still went to give the Misses Brewster their lessons, but I was generally obliged to hurry away, because of another engagement that I had in the Edgware Road; and one day she said, rather wearily, when her uncle was sitting by her side, "I wish Margaret could stay." That same evening he came to me, and begged me to devote a portion of each day to Miriam, offering, at the same time, to make up all deficiencies that might arise from the neglect of my regular duties. I acceded at once to his request, for I was painfully anxious to atone in some measure for the negligence of former years; and when he came to speak of terms I would not listen to him. I was not absolutely depending on my labour for my own support, or that of others, and I could honestly afford to make some sacrifice for Mirrie; and I promised him to spend at least five evenings of the week in Portland Place

I soon saw how great a gainer I was by this seeming loss of time; for intercourse with Mirrie now was like waiting at heaven's gate. Her sweet young life was closing serenely, beautifully, as it had run its course, ever since we saw her first. She knew quite well that she was dying; but not a pang of fear, scarcely a shadow of regret, passed over her, and yet the future was as fair in its promise as earthly future could be. She was mistress of her uncle's stately mansion, and mistress, too, of his heart. She was loved by all. She was singularly beautiful, and the heiress of great wealth. But it was only for her uncle's sake that she wished to stay. There was no impatience about her,—no morbid fancy; she was quite content to get well again, and live, if it should please God to restore her. But she was happier at the thought of "*going home*," as she always called it, than at any other prospect.

Sitting by her couch I learned many a lesson of patience and humility, and now I knew the secret of her wondrous loveliness of character. It was the rare humility which led her always out of self; a precious grace, singularly developed in her daily life and conversation, partly the result of natural temperament, and partly the silent growth of those genuine Christian principles which had been so early implanted, and so well cultured in her soul.

As midsummer approached, she drooped more and more, and, the physicians advising country air, and professing their inability to stay the progress of the fatal disease which had fastened upon her, Mr. King resolved to take her into Devon, and nothing would do but that I must accompany them.

How strange it was that she should cling to me,—to me, who had been almost her enemy,—who had poured many a bitter draught into her cup in the days gone by, when I might have added so much to its sweetness! Her childlike fondness for my presence, her tender words and radiant smiles, her gratitude for every little service I performed, smote me to the heart. I had been cruel to her; yes, very cruel. But she loved me, and spoke of me as her dearest

friend,—"her own best Margaret." I dismissed my pupils a little earlier than usual, and went down with Mr. King and Miriam to Devon; two servants also going with us, besides Miss Downing's maid, for Mr. King's command was that I should be waited upon hand and foot. Nothing was too good, too costly for one who ministered to his dying child.

But Devon did not suit the invalid; it was a very hot summer, and we all seemed to pine for a more bracing atmosphere; and finally Mirrie thought we should all be better if we went to St. Eldred's; and, as her slightest wish was law, thither we went, and settled ourselves down very comfortably in Susan Pratten's best apartments. Indeed, we took the whole house, which was no other than the dear old Kelver House, into which Susan had just moved, her increasing connexion necessitating larger and better accommodation. And we, in that delicious air, were soon invigorated, —we, whose days on earth were to be prolonged; while she whose little span of life was dwindling fast away, grew feebler every hour. Her principal ailment was weakness, for she suffered little pain; now and then she had to struggle with oppression, and sometimes her cough was wearying; but, generally speaking, she lay on her sofa, or sat pillowed in her great chair by the open window, looking out on the well-known prospect, and feasting, as it were, upon its loveliness; but oftentimes gazing dreamily across the waves, as if to some far distant land beyond the sunset. Very soon it came to be a question of weeks and days only, and then of days and hours.

I saw that her death would be as her life had been,—calm, gentle, and instinct with that peace which filled all her soul, and lifted her so gradually from the things of time, that to us who waited about her it seemed as if already she stood almost within the golden gate, one foot within the radiant portal, the other still on earth. We had been talking of the wreck of the "Hirondelle"—of the early morning when the sailors brought her first to Kelver House, a little human waif tossed up by the great sea. "How good God has been to me!" she whispered—"always good! and now He is

taking me *home*—home to dear mamma and papa, and my little brother, and to your dear papa and mamma, Margaret, darling. Oh, what a glorious company that will be! What a happy gathering! No death there! no night! no change! to go out no more! And you will come, too,"—and she looked at Mr. King,—"you and Margaret? Only a little time. Margaret, do you hear the waves upon the rocks? Hark, they say,

'Storm, billow, whirlwind past,
Come to thy God at last.'"

The sun went down in glory, the red lights faded in the west, the stars came out, and still we watched the pale, sweet face, and listened to the failing breath, till midnight came and passed, and the first streaks of dawn were breaking on the hills. Then she opened her blue eyes once more, but we perceived that mortal sight was gone—she was gazing on a world which was not yet for us. "Mamma," she murmured, "my own mamma! yes, and all of them!" Then, as it were, recognizing us, perhaps by our voices, perhaps by the pressure of the hand, she said, clearly and distinctly, "Uncle! Margaret! thanks be unto God, who giveth us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ." And as she whispered the precious Name again and again, as if its sweetness lingered on her dying lips, a flush came and passed, a smile that might have been the reflection of heaven's own glory lighted all her features, a gentle thrill passed through her wasted frame, and we knew that the kind Angel of Death was taking her from our warm clasp into his chill but loving arms.

"Her quiet eyelids closed—she had
Another morn than ours."

CHAPTER XLVIII.

THE HAVEN.

We laid Miriam to rest beside her mother; and then it was time for me to go home and recommence my duties—if

indeed by this time my pupils were not too thoroughly dispersed to be gathered once more together. Mr. King and I parted at the station, and as he bade me farewell he said, "Mrs. Tredgold, remember I am always your friend and your husband's. I owe you more than I ever can repay. I shall see you soon again; now good-bye—and this is something that my dear child left for you."

"*This*" seemed like a letter; but when, safely lodged in the cab, *en route* for King-street, I opened the envelope, I found it to be ten bank-notes for £100 each, enclosed in half a sheet of paper, on which was written in Mr. King's own hand, "With Miriam Downing's love to her dearest Margaret Tredgold." At first, thinking of the past, I felt I could not take it; then it seemed that it would be giving great and needless pain to one already sorely wounded, if I refused it. At any rate, I would keep it till my husband came home—it was September now, and he had said November—only two months distant!

It was a wild and dreary autumn; and often I lay awake at night listening to the fury of the wind; for that year the equinoctial gales were unusually prolonged and violent; and now I knew that Gilbert was on the sea again, for by this time the "Caroline" had sailed. I had taken up some of my pupils again, though some during my long absence had found other teachers; but I did not greatly concern myself about it, for I had still as many lessons to give as I desired. Perhaps I had grown lazy; but certainly I felt little inclined to bustle about from house to house and from one quarter of London to another as I had done in the first two years of my professorship; and new work that I had never anticipated came upon me. It was in October that certain tidings reached me of my cousin Sibyl; she had left her husband's house, and it was years before any of us saw her more; and then—oh! poor Sibyl—she had tested the truth of that Word which emphatically says, "The wages of sin is death." Mr. Saunderson was dying—dying with all his wealth about him; yet with no kindly hand to smoothe his pillow, no kindred love to watch beside

his bed of suffering, no earnest voice to speak to him of aught beyond the grave. And one day he said, "Fetch Margaret Torrington—I mean Mrs. Tredgold—tell her to come and nurse me, and she will heap coals of fire on my head!"

I need not say I went immediately, and tears streamed down the withered cheeks, when I stood beside him, and gave him the medicine he had rejected at a hireling's hand. "You are a good child," he said, "to come to me, for I was very hard to you; but I always respected you; I did, indeed: only I love money and influence, and I thought—*she* whom we will not name had both, and Gilbert should secure them. Then I was enraged because my will was thwarted, and I hated you, chiefly because I had injured you. As my heir, Gilbert need not have married money; but I fancied the match, and I had willed it, and you know how it ended. Thank God it is I, and not he, who must endure this shame." He talked often of his worldly affairs, and said that Gilbert should be his heir again, and I grew daily more and more anxious for my husband's return, as I was quite uncertain whether he would wish to inherit that which he had once deliberately put from him, and which I was sure he never had regretted. Meanwhile, I tried to turn Mr. Saunderson's attention to better things; and sometimes he would listen to the message of salvation as if it were indeed glad tidings of great joy; but oftener he grew restless and moaned about the heartlessness of those around him, and his folly in sending away Gilbert, who was the only person, beside myself, who had not fawned to him for his riches. And as he grew worse his constant cry was for Gilbert, Gilbert! "When did I expect him? Had I left plain directions for him to follow me? What was the day of the month, and when did people say the 'Caroline' would be in port?"

These questions were unceasing, till at last I thought he asked them out of sheer habit, not thinking of an answer; for his mind evidently wandered, and he spoke wildly of many things, but always coming back to the same plaintive,

almost querulous cry, "When will Gilbert come?" At last, one dreary afternoon, when November winds were howling through the leafless trees in the park, and November mists were closing in the brief and cheerless day, a servant came to the room, and said very quietly, but with a certain meaning in her face that made me thrill again, "If you please, ma'am, you are wanted in the drawing-room!" I looked the question that I dared not ask, and the woman's responsive glance told me I was not mistaken. Half dizzy with the sudden joy, I rose to go, thinking Mr. Saunderson was dozing, and would not miss me; but he was wide awake, and he said in clearer tones than I had heard from him for several days, "Child, your husband is come. Go to him, and bring him here, then leave us together!"

I obeyed. He had not seen the servant's face or mine; he had only heard me called away, which had happened several times before. Surely some strange, mysterious instinct had told him that the one he longed so much to see was come at last. I pass over my own meeting with my husband. We did not stay to converse long; for I knew that the sick man would be painfully excited if he had to wait long for us; and even while Gilbert was listening to the story I had to tell, in order to prepare him for the interview, the bell rang, and presently the nurse came to beg that Mr. Tredgold would see Mr. Saunderson as soon as possible. "And, indeed, ma'am," the woman said to me, "I cannot keep him in bed much longer; he insists on dressing and coming down, and he will be sure to have a fit if he attempts it."

So we hurried up-stairs; and there was the poor invalid, quiet enough now that his desire was granted, his eyes glistening, and his weak hand held out to greet the son he had driven from him in his plenitude of strength and power. "My boy! my boy!" he cried, as Gilbert warmly clasped the yellow, shrunken fingers, "you are come back again before I am shut into my coffin. As God has granted that prayer, perhaps He may hear other prayers, and save my sinful soul. But you—can *you* forgive me? I would

have forced you to do evil—to sell yourself body and soul; and because you resisted I spurned you and denounced you. Gilbert, I was wrong. Can you forgive me?"

"All there is to forgive, and that is not much, since it all worked for good, I freely, fully forgive, dear sir; but I have also to ask your pardon; for, with the impetuosity of youth, I answered you as it did not become me to answer my benefactor. You were mistaken in your views for me, but you meant well, I think; certainly I owed you reverence and gratitude. I could not help leaving you, for you would have it so, and my conscience told me, as well as my inclinations, that I could not accept your alternative; still, I might have left you more humbly, more kindly, more—"

"Say not another word. You were not to blame at all! But you are here again, and you are my heir once more. Hush; not a word! I never meant to leave you penniless, as I threatened in my anger; for did you not save me from the sea? Did you not risk your young life for mine, long ago, at St. Eldred's, Gilbert? I have made my will, and it is all right."

"But I must know, please, what that will is?"

"Why should you? You may trust me now. Everything is yours! You are master here the moment the breath is out of my body: and it is going very fast—and you have not come a day too soon. Margaret is mistress already." He was so much exhausted then that it was unsafe to prolong the conversation; but, later in the evening, when Gilbert and I were sitting with him, and the nurse had retired for several hours' sleep, my husband recurred to the subject of the will. "Do you really mean, Mr. Saunderson," he said, "that you have left me all your great wealth?" "Every penny of it, my boy; it is yours without reserve, without any stipulation! It is only what is your due; for, did I not take you from your original sphere, and accustom you to all the luxuries and amenities of a life of ease? I had no right to change all your views, to give you new aims, new hopes, and in some sort a new nature, and then cast you back upon your own resources—the very years which

might have been most useful to you, had I left you alone, wasted—utterly wasted!"

"Not so, sir. The education you gave me I had yearned for all my life, and that remained when I returned to my old condition."

"But, having once proclaimed you to the world as my heir, I ought not to have disappointed you. However, though I was wrong, perhaps the struggle did you good, and it is all right now. When you follow me to the grave you will be a rich man, a very rich man, Gilbert?"

"Forgive me, Mr. Saunderson, but there is your—"

"Don't call her *that!*" he cried, starting up furiously; "no wife of mine, miserable woman!"

"There is Sibyl!" pursued Gilbert, firmly.

"And what of her? What is she to us?"

"She must be cared for. The day will come when she will need a home; and her father will never receive her; her married sisters cannot! You must provide for her, Mr. Saunderson."

A terrible altercation ensued—terrible for one so near the end of mortal life. At first he swore Sibyl might drown herself in the river, or die in a ditch, ere she should touch a penny of his money! Of course, after what had occurred, her marriage settlements were mere waste paper. But my dear husband, in his own mild, firm way, reasoned and persuaded, and soothed and entreated, till at last, considerably to my own astonishment, the victory was won. A certain sum of money, enough to ensure a comfortable income, was to be placed in the hands of trustees, for Sibyl's use whenever she should need it—of course under certain conditions. Then arose another question—had Mr. Saunderson no real relatives?

Yes; he had a sister who had once offended him, whom he had sworn never to see again, and she had two sons. So much was certain; but that was all he knew about her, except that she was actually living at that time in London, in very straitened circumstances—a widow, and an invalid. Then came another battle. Gilbert insisted that the bulk

of the property should be left to this sister and to her sons, the true and natural heirs. I quite agreed with him. *We* had no right to it, though the law might give it us!"

"Are you insane?" said Mr. Saunderson at last, "or are you as proud as the devil? Here you are, a young man beginning life! You have married early—too early for any one who has no private fortune. You may have a large family; ill-health may visit you; you are charged even now with parents not absolutely aged, and an invalid sister, who may be on your hands for years. Is it right that you should reject the proffered good? Are you not doing your wife an injustice? Are you not wronging the children that may be born to you? And all for *what?* I cannot understand it."

"You mistake me," returned Gilbert; "*I* do not reject the fortune which is offered me. But, my dear Mr. Saunderson, so sudden an access of riches would not make me happy. I was not born to unlimited wealth; it would do me harm. I should be out of my sphere, and I should not know how rightly to make use of it. You have promised that Sibyl shall be cared for; now say that the bulk of your great riches shall go to your relations. Then I will tell you what you shall do for me. For my wife's sake chiefly, I wish to live on land; yet a seafaring life seems the only one in which I can gain advancement. If I had money, I could, I believe, go into partnership with the owners of the 'Caroline.' Certainly I could become a merchant; and then it would go hard, if God gave me strength and health, and some years of life, if I did not place my family in the circumstances in which your lavish kindness would place them now. I would rather work my way, sir! I want *capital*, that is all! Give me a few thousands from the million and more you would bequeath me, and I shall be well satisfied."

"And you really mean that you would rather not have the whole, save *her* portion? Yes; I see she ought to have something to save her from the worst when her evil day shall come. But you might honestly and honourably take all the rest?"

"I think not. Give me what I ask, and no more."

And so it was settled; and next day the lawyer came, and another will was made according to Gilbert's dictation; only Mr. Saunderson insisted on naming a higher sum for his legacy than we had thought of; and it was to be paid down, duty free. Also, the furniture of the town house, and the plate and pictures therein, &c., &c., were left to me! Tenterly was to descend intact to Mrs. Raymond, the long-estranged, half-forgotten sister. The last item in the will pleased me much; it was an after-thought of the testator's when all was finished. The lawyer had to resume his pen, and write "£5,000 to Augusta Mary Crofton, seventh daughter of Herbert and Leonora Crofton, of Crofton Lawn, Cotswoldbury, in the county of Gloucester."

And the will was signed and duly attested, and we were at peace.

But that very evening Gilbert brought Mrs. Raymond to her brother's side. She was a grave, gentle woman, much younger than Mr. Saunderson, bearing on her countenance the traces of heavy care and many sorrows; and forgivenesses were exchanged, for both had erred—the one in girlish folly, the other in fierce, implacable resentment. Oh! the joy, the peace, the beauty of a perfect reconciliation even between fellow-mortals. Still more transcendant the bliss, the calm, the glory of reconciliation between God and the sinner. And would that reconciliation be? We hoped for it, we prayed for it. We believed at last—just at the last—that it was granted, for the dying lips pronounced with infinite love and reverence that precious Name which is above all other names—the name of Him by whom alone we come to God—Jesus Christ, the only Saviour.

Therefore we hoped; but sad it is when last words are *all* the testimony one can grasp. We knew that one look to the Cross would suffice, one touch of the garment's hem would heal the sin-sick soul. But how much happier is it to look back on a life given to God, a manifest faith, a holy walk, to which the parting words are but the seal and close!

I have not much more to say now; my story is nearly at an end. As Gilbert had hinted, the Messrs. Carmichael, his

employers, were very willing to receive him into their prosperous firm. They were both elderly men, and their sons were not inclined to commerce: they were glad to secure a young partner, with capital of his own at command, with energy, and tact, and knowledge of various kinds. And it pleased God to bless all Gilbert's efforts: he worked hard and steadily, and every year saw him richer and more influential; and at Mr. King's death, which happened about ten years' ago, I found that I was heiress to some of the wealth that would have been dear Miriam's had she lived. And then it was that my husband revealed to me a secret he had kept for years—the only one, I quite believe, he ever kept from me. He wanted to buy back Tredgold Court—a dream of youth that I fancied he had forgotten: but it was not till my fortune came that he could do so prudently or safely; for the business, which had increased mightily, required an immense amount of money, and the two original partners of the firm had now retired, and *Gilbert Tredgold's* name stood alone where for several generations had been "Carmichael and Son," both in London and at Southam.

So we bought Tredgold Court, and there we spend much of our time, though on Gilbert's account we are obliged to have our house in town. And we have tall sons and daughters; and one of the latter, who is not like either her father or her mother—a blue-eyed, fair-haired girl—we call *Miriam!* My eldest son is just eighteen, and my greatest trouble is that he has chosen a sea-faring life. He is in Her Majesty's service as a naval officer. My youngest daughter can just run about, and there are plenty between her—my pretty little Nora—and her eldest brother, my precious sailor-boy. The Norths still live in the Palace of Content; but it has been added to, and raised another story, and built out here and there, till it really is a curious, and, I am afraid, not a very handsome edifice. But it is roomy, and Mrs. North says "so convenient," though I cannot quite agree to that. She is as pretty as ever, I do believe—those gentle little sunbeams of women generally wear well; and she is quite as devoted to "William" as in

old time, only now he is such a famous man, and "*everybody* knows his worth." Hetty and Willy are married, and I am told that my namesake Maggie has a lover. So years glide by! Gussie, too, is a happy wife and mother, and she and her little ones come often to Tredgold Court. One of them, a girl—I must say it—has a tendency to "nipping;" but her mother is nipping this tendency in its first developments.

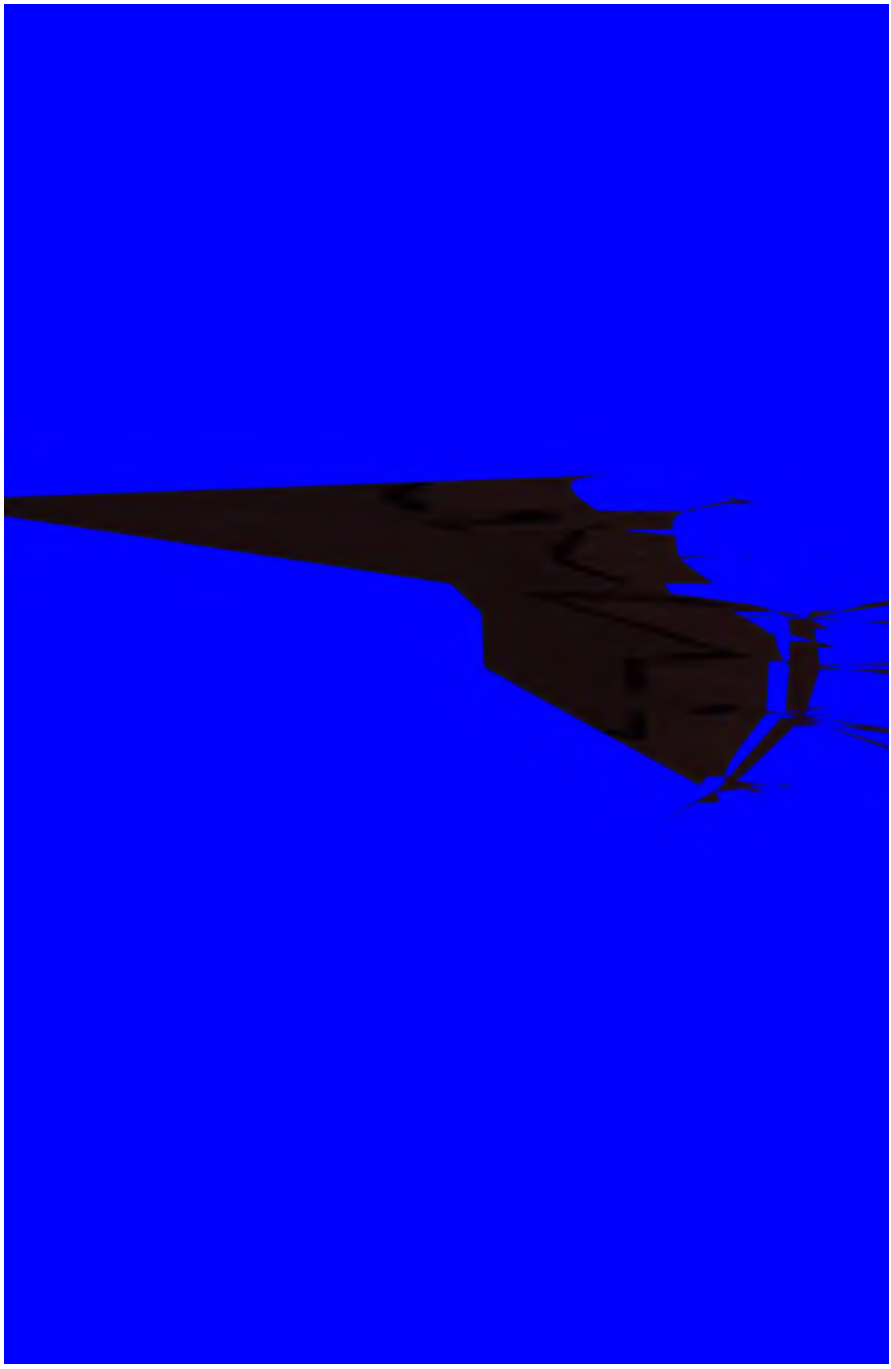
Bertha became the wife of Dr. Berners' successor, and Alice, greatly improved in health, lives half her time with her, and the other half with us. "Aunt Alice" is our children's idol, albeit they tyrannise over her occasionally, and scold her when she cannot enter into *their* modern views, which are "quite up to the times." The dear old people are laid to rest in North Combe Churchyard, and Susan Pratten is there also. Of course she died in all the glory of ancient spinsterhood. But Sally and her baker think what a grand mistake she made, and how much happier she might have been with a husband and bairns of her own. They do not know what I do—that Aunt Susan never had an offer! And I keep my old friend's secret.

Mrs. Brown still lives, but she has retired from business, and Mr. and Mrs. Wright keep on the shop, though no longer in King Street, now Southampton Row. And Mrs. Wright, be it known, has become immensely stout, and is said to keep her husband in good order, and to spoil her children. Certainly he is rather subdued, and they are most obstreperous. But Jane is Jane still, when we meet, as good as gold, I am sure; though her sisters will have it she is master of the house. Well, some men are better and happier under petticoat government, and I dare say Mr. Wright is one of them.

I have not heard or seen much of Cecilia; but the archangelic Eustace, in course of time, became "stupid and inane." Gilbert and I never thought him anything else. He was naturally quiet and bashful, poor young man, and his wife would have him "to the fore," and push him into notice, when, to her infinite disgust, he invariably made a simpleton of himself. "For peace his soul was yearning,"

but he never had it; for he had married a whirlwind, a tempest, a volcano, a feminine something, endued with perpetual motion, and given up to perpetual excitement. Poor archangelic Eustace! I fear he had a rough time of it after he ceased to be a "darling," and a "pet."

So now we have, indeed, reached our earthly haven—for awhile we are at rest; though how soon storms will re-awake and breezes blow again we cannot tell. Our voyage of life is not ended, and, perhaps, ere long, we shall have to leave these smooth, calm waters for the tossing billows and the angry surge; but we do not fear shipwreck, because the Pilot is with us, and we know—having His own royal word for it—that He will bring us safe to the eternal shore. For we have no abiding city here; and the "city out of sight," is, indeed, our "desired haven." Thither God will bring us, through Christ, in His own good time. And if it be His holy will, I pray that one of us may not be landed there long before the other. Gilbert, who was the only love of my youth, is still the husband of my choice, revered, esteemed, and, oh! how much beloved! How much more than in our early days, when first I learned to know his worth, and look for his approval! He is, as he has ever been since I knew him first, my dearest *friend*, my guide, my earthly king, to whom I owe, and gladly render all allegiance. My heart says to him, though I do not often put it into words:—

"I love thee to the level of every day's
Most quiet need, by sun, and candle-light;
I love thee freely as men strive for right;
I love thee purely, as they turn from praise;
I love thee with the passion put to use,
In my old griefs, and with my childhood's faith;
I love thee with a love I seemed to lose
With my lost saints; I love thee with the breath
Smiles, tears of all my life; and, if God choose,
I shall but love thee better after death."

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